

Duquesne University Duquesne Scholarship Collection

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Spring 1-1-2006

Lyric Subjectivity, Ethics, Contemporary Poetics: Claudia Rankine, Fanny Howe, Elizabeth Robinson

Maureen Gallagher

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Gallagher, M. (2006). Lyric Subjectivity, Ethics, Contemporary Poetics: Claudia Rankine, Fanny Howe, Elizabeth Robinson (Doctoral dissertation, Duquesne University). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/77>

This Worldwide Access is brought to you for free and open access by Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Duquesne Scholarship Collection. For more information, please contact phillipsg@duq.edu.

LYRIC SUBJECTIVITY, ETHICS, CONTEMPORARY POETICS:
CLAUDIA RANKINE, FANNY HOWE, ELIZABETH ROBINSON

A Dissertation

Presented to the McAnulty Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Maureen Gallagher

December 2015

Copyright by
Maureen Gallagher

2015

LYRIC SUBJECTIVITY, ETHICS, CONTEMPORARY POETICS:
CLAUDIA RANKINE, FANNY HOWE, ELIZABETH ROBINSON

By

Maureen Gallagher

Approved October 27, 2015

Dr. Linda Kinnahan
Professor of English
(Committee Chair)

Dr. Faith Barrett
Associate Professor of English
(Committee Member)

Dr. Laura Engel
Associate Professor of English
(Committee Member)

Dr. James Swindal
Dean, McNulty Graduate School of
Liberal Arts
Professor of Philosophy

Dr. Greg Barnhisel
Chair, English Department
Professor of English

ABSTRACT

LYRIC SUBJECTIVITY, ETHICS, CONTEMPORARY POETICS:
CLAUDIA RANKINE, FANNY HOWE, ELIZABETH ROBINSON

By

Maureen Gallagher

December 2015

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Linda Kinnahan

This dissertation investigates ethics and lyric subjectivity in the writings of three American women poets. I consider select poems and poetics of Claudia Rankine, Fanny Howe, and Elizabeth Robinson, in order to argue that their postlanguage lyric poetry retains lyric subjectivity and reformulates it as ethical insofar as it is “circumspective” or “other-oriented”; that is, the lyric “I” is depicted as constituted through its relations with alterity. I apply contemporary literary-ethical methodology, notably the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, the poetics of Paul Celan, the *hauntology* of Jacques Derrida, and the *poethics* of Joan Retallack, in order to demonstrate how these poets retain and revise the lyric. All three poets register the lyric subject’s interiority and exteriority, use extensive intertextuality, and deploy self-reflexivity. Furthermore, I examine the ethics of reading and writing poetry, and suggest that these poets deploy what I term the Levinasian-Celian model of postlanguage lyric poetry,

wherein the poetic text is conceptualized as a site of ethical encounter between writer and reader. Rankine, Howe, and Robinson present a range of explorations of a lyric “I” that acknowledges alterity within subjectivity. Rankine critiques what she depicts as the deadening mythology of autonomous subjectivity in American culture and language. She uses the textual strategies of fragmentation, interruption, and juxtaposition to demonstrate the subject as both violable and capable of revitalization through ethical encounter within the lyric. Howe, a Catholic poet, puts the traditions of Romantic and Objectivist poetry in conversation and draws on liberation theology adds both a spiritual and politically committed dimension to the Levinasian-Celanian model of lyric encounter. Howe uses serial/spiral poetic form to underscore subjectivity as wandering, dynamic, and constituting “being-in-the-world” for the Other. Robinson draws on supernatural tropes, including the *doppelgänger* and the ghost, to underscore the distortions of lyric reflections of the self and the otherness inherent in self-encounter. Further, Robinson’s conceptualizations of lyric voice and lyric address are Levinasian in their potential for ethical encounter between reader and poet, but she modifies this model with a Derridean emphasis on the persistence of difference and distance between the lyric “I” and the lyric “you.”

DEDICATION

To my family, particularly my husband, Laurence, my mother, Patricia, and my daughters, Molly and Jane.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by expressing my appreciation to my committee, Linda Kinnahan, Faith Barrett, and Laura Engel, whose feedback, recommendations, flexibility, and kindness have been instrumental during this process. I particularly appreciate Laura Engel's supportive enthusiasm for my work, wherever it was leading, and Faith Barrett's willingness to join my committee, "sight unseen," that is, before she had even met me or started teaching at Duquesne. I must make a special note of gratitude for my dissertation director, Linda Kinnahan, whose great generosity of spirit has made this project possible: she has on many occasions shared with me not only scholarly expertise and professional opportunities, but also her space, her time, and her friendship. Moreover, Linda's generous readings of an expansive range of writings have modeled for me a kind of intellectual openness that I can only hope to emulate.

I'd also like to thank the Duquesne English Department, which has been a truly supportive community. Many faculty members have provided me with intellectual guidance and professional mentorship through coursework, assistantships, and doctoral exams, including Greg Barnhisel, Laura Callanan, Tom Kinnahan, Magali Michael, James Purdy, Judy Suh, Dan Watkins, and, in the Philosophy Department, Lanei Rodemeyer. Also, I have been privileged to work on my doctorate in the company of many supportive peers. In particular, I would like to thank Marianne Holohan, Mary Parish, and Emily Rutter for countless intellectual exchanges and words of encouragement.

Finally, I'd like to thank my family, particularly my husband Laurence, who has been a daily and unwavering source of support during this long process. I'd also like to thank my mother, Patricia, who for years encouraged me to go to graduate school, where she knew I

belonged. Finally, I'd like to acknowledge my daughters, Molly and Jane, whose entry into my life has coincided with my work on this dissertation. Every day, they fill our lives with moments of wonder.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
Dedication	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
“Two Camps”	2
Contemporary Women’s Poetry and the Lyric “I”	4
Ethical Lyric Subjectivity	6
Literary-Ethical Methodology	7
Ethics and Politics in Literary Criticism	9
Literary-Ethical Inquiry and Modern Poetry	12
Gender, Ethics and Postlanguage Lyric Poetry.....	14
Overview of the Chapters	17
CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS:	
CONTEMPORARY SUBJECTIVITY, WHERE LYRIC MEETS LANGUAGE,	
AND THE ETHICS OF POETIC ENCOUNTER.....	22
Conceptualizing Subjectivity	23
Definitions of Lyric.....	27
Romantic Lyric Poetry and Subjectivity	31
The Language School Critique	35
The Lyric “I” in Contemporary Women’s Poetry.....	38
Subjectivity in Language Writing: Lyn Hejinian’s <i>My Life</i>	40

After Language: Lyric in the Turn of the Twenty-First Century	47
Contemporary American Poetry and the Discourse of Hybridity	53
The Ethics of Levinas and Derrida	58
Poethics: Contemporary Poetry and Ethics	62
Ethics, Encounter, and Address in Literature and Lyric	67
CHAPTER TWO: THE FIRST PERSON, ETHICS, AND ENCOUNTER IN	
CLAUDIA RANKINE'S <i>DON'T LET ME BE LONELY: AN AMERICAN LYRIC</i>	73
Description of the Text	76
Subjectivity and Ethics	85
Autonomy: A Law Unto Oneself	90
The Commodified Subject	96
Self as Spectator	104
Mass Media Culture and Living Death	110
Spectatorial Sterility	113
The Fragmented "I"	118
The Scripted "I": The First-Person Social	122
The Death of the "I"	126
Ethical Practice of Media Consumption: From Spectatorship to Witness	130
Writing as Ethical Practice	137
Poetic Handshake: Writing, Reading, and Ethical Encounter	143
CHAPTER THREE: "THE STRANGE WHOEVER THAT GOES UNDER THE	
NAME OF 'I' IN MY POEMS": LYRIC SUBJECTIVITY AND ETHICS IN	
FANNY HOWE'S LATER POETRY	155

Critical Considerations of Howe's Lyric Subjectivity.....	157
Howe's Poetic Classification and the Problem of Transcendence.....	160
Sincerity, Ethics, and the Objectivist Nexus.....	164
Objectivism and Lyric Subjectivity	173
Ethics and Form: Serial Poetry, Spiral Movement, and Howe's Poetics of Bewilderment.....	176
Liberation Theology and Howe's Poethics.....	183
Perception and Encounter in Howe's Poetry	189
Exteriority and Interiority, Transcendence and Immanence	195
Bewilderment, Wandering, and Howe's Poethics	203
"9/11": Ethics and Textual Encounter	207
Modern Poetry: Limitations and Ethical Possibilities	214
CHAPTER FOUR: DOUBLES, GHOSTS, AND TEXTUAL ENCOUNTERS:	
ETHICS AND ELIZABETH ROBINSON'S POSTLANGUAGE LYRIC POETRY ...	222
Robinson's Poetic Classification	222
Overview of the Chapter	224
Description of Robinson's Poetry: Form, Style, Politics, and Ethics	227
Lyric Subjectivity.....	233
Literary Doubles	237
Self-Encounter in <i>Counterpart</i>	241
Intertextuality and Poethics.....	248
<i>On Ghosts</i> : Haunting, Subjectivity, and Alterity	252
Presence, Absence, and the Ethics of Hauntology.....	253

Haunted Subjectivity.....	258
Poetic Hauntings	262
Voice in Lyric Poetry.....	265
The Ghosts of Lyric: Translation, Composition, Self and Voice	271
Apostrophe, Lyric, and Textual Encounter.....	280
“Gaps in the Span” and Rejected Gifts: The Problem of Connection	285
“Speak”: Direct Address, Voice, and the Ethics of Lyric Encounter	292
CONCLUSION.....	297
WORKS CITED	305

INTRODUCTION

You want pronouns to take on the corporeal,
but they are like the static of a sick-dream,
almost amenable and at the same time,
frizzy, off their marks.

(Elizabeth Robinson, “Allege or Elegy,” *Counterpart* 77)

In everyday uses of spoken and written language, we employ personal pronouns to indicate others and ourselves. But whom, or what, do we really invoke when we use personal pronouns? As contemporary poet and critic Elizabeth Robinson observes in the opening lines of her 2012 poem “Allege or Elegy,” the uses of personal pronouns in language are so naturalized that we assume that the “almost amenable” personal pronouns like “I,” “you,” and “we” simply correspond to the “corporeal,” the embodied persons to whom we refer. But, of course, discourse always takes place within a context, and pronouns in particular are always shifting based on the participants, situations, and perspectives in any given instance of interpersonal communication or written text. The pronouns “I,” “you,” “he,” “she,” etc., cannot “take on the corporeal,” for they are always “frizzy, off their marks”—it cannot be otherwise.

On another level, Robinson’s opening lines also allude to the field of contemporary poetry studies over the last four decades, where the deployment of one personal pronoun in particular—the short, common, and seemingly humble “I”—has been the source of much heated debate and intellectual exploration.¹ Many poets and poetry critics have become invested in the ideological, political, and ethical implications of both conventional and unconventional uses of

¹ Or perhaps the “I” is not so humble after all: it seems telling that only English users capitalize the singular, first-person subjective pronoun, just as we do with proper nouns. According to Caroline Winter, the “I” began to be capitalized in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, possibly for the legibility of scribes’ transcriptions. However, as Winter notes, it is hard not to think that the capitalization of the “I” may reflect and/or reinforce Anglo-American cultural values such as individualism, ambition, and self-importance (“Me, Myself, and I”).

the lyric “I.” Indeed, the “I” has often been read as a marker that divides the common critical narrative of the two “camps” of late twentieth-century poetry and their contrasting approaches to the lyric.

“Two Camps”

In the critical discourse of the final two decades of the twentieth century, contemporary poetry in the U.S. has often been divided into “two camps.” In the one “camp,” often called mainstream poetry, the first-person subject of the poem is closely identified with the poet.² Indeed, this type of poetry, having “incorporated the centrality of self and the belief in the importance of individual history” (Swensen xix), has been understood by its critics as predicated on the expression of authentic experience either lived through or witnessed by a lyric “I,” a first-person, stable speaking subject. Rooted in Romantic lyric verse, contemporary iterations of expressive poetry have been refracted through developments in mid-twentieth century formalist and confessional poetics; contemporary poetic texts of this type often display the tight construction of formalist poetry but are highly personal in tone and content. In academic criticism, expressive, mainstream, and postconfessional are various terms that are used to describe such types of poetic texts.

The other “camp” of late twentieth century poetry identifies itself as avant-garde and/or experimental and traces its lineage to key avant-garde and modernist poets of the early twentieth

² The division between “two camps” is only one way to describe the poetic landscape of the late twentieth century. In a 2002 essay, critic Mark Wallace describes five contemporary “major networks of poetry production”: 1) New Formalists, who advocate the return to traditional poetic forms; 2) postconfessional poetry, which is associated with university MFA programs; 3) “identity-based poetics” that are associated with both MFA programs and, increasingly, spoken-word “slam” poetry; 4) proponents of “New American speech-based poetics,” which are successors to the Beat generation, the New York school, and practitioners of ethnopoetics; and 5) the avant-garde, most recognizably the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E network. While postconfessional poetry probably comes in for the most frequent attacks by Language writers, the rhetoric of the “two camps” division might place group 5, the avant-garde/language school, in opposition to the “mainstream” poetry produced by poets across any or all of the other four groups, as Steve McCaffrey essentially does in his essay “Language Poetry,” which I reference in chapter one. Wallace himself acknowledges that these groups aren’t always distinct, as there is much crossover among them; in particular, groups 4 and 5 “are so intermingled as to be indistinguishable in many cases” (193). As a result, what counts as “avant-garde” and what counts as “mainstream” or “conventional” poetry varies within literary discourse.

century. The preeminent type of poetry in this “camp” has been the writings of the Language (originally spelled L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E) network of writers, who developed a movement in North America in the 1970s and 1980s. In Language writing, language as a non-transparent medium is emphasized and self-reference is often absent; the lyric “I” may disappear completely. Influenced by poststructuralist and Marxist theories, Language poets are suspicious of ideas of authenticity in language. For example, Language writer and critic Charles Bernstein emphasizes that no language is “natural,” for every element is chosen (49). According to Marjorie Perloff, the most influential critic who champions contemporary avant-garde poetry, the more radical poetic writings of the final decades of the twentieth century have opened the field of poetry not through an embrace of “authenticity” but as a turn toward artifice, highlighting poetry as making (praxis) rather than self-expression. Along with the challenge to language as a transparent medium through the deployment of experimental and often obscure formal strategies, Language poetry aims to interrogate underlying assumptions behind conventional lyric poetry; as Perloff argues, the “Romantic formula ‘irreducible human values’ is fabricated” (93). Paramount among the “Romantic” human values Perloff alludes to is the Enlightenment/post-Enlightenment concept of a stable, autonomous subject that has often been seen as assumed in lyric poetry—that is, a self-determining subject who is presented as existing outside of larger cultural contexts and inside the privacy and interiority of the mind. Thus, Perloff, Bernstein, and other critics and Language writers link the first-person subject to an expression of what cultural studies critic Paul Smith has called “the ideological ‘I,’” the cultural concept of personhood in the West that is often so internalized that individuals assume it to be “natural” and “universal” (105). This “ideological ‘I’” has been thoroughly critiqued through poststructuralist demystifications of authoritative Western ideologies and their capitalist, patriarchal, imperialist, and racist

foundations. Thus, the critiques of mainstream poetry by avant-garde poets and their critical advocates are highly political, for they claim that the assumption of the transparent use of language is complicit in the replication of dominant Western ideologies. Avant-garde critiques are also made on ethical grounds and center on the acts of reading and writing, for they assert that twentieth-century lyric poetry, with the use of postconfessional voice in particular, either oppress essentially passive readers with an overpowering, singular voice, or offer readers a model of subjectivity that retreats inward, into the private and interior world of the self and away from others. Interiority in poetry, the critique goes, promotes solipsistic narcissism and/or a soothing reassurance of the reader's own presumptions of autonomy and coherence. In the wake of the critiques posed by Language writers—and, more broadly, poststructuralists—a contemporary poet who is interested in retaining recuperating lyric poetry faces a central question: how can one deploy lyric subjectivity ethically?

Contemporary Women's Poetry and the Lyric "I"

Furthermore, the ethics of the lyric "I" is a particularly significant issue for contemporary American women poets. Feminist poets and critics have long interpreted the conventional lyric "I" as gendered masculine in its quest for domination and/or solipsistic detachment (Sewell 2). In the 1980s and early 1990s, feminist critical discourse on women's poetry also drew on the polarities of "two camps" rhetoric, with a focus on the gendered implications of the first person. Some feminist critics championed the reclamation of a strong, female lyric "I" alongside an expressive and/or representational depiction of women's personal experiences in order to provide an empowering model of subjective agency for (women) readers. Meanwhile, feminist critics who advocated for avant-garde experimentation charged that expressive women's poetry either reproduces the patriarchal power dynamics inherent in conventional lyric forms or tends to

replicate male/female binaries of subjectivity.³ As a result of the gendered history of lyric poetry and specific feminist conversations within the broader context of the “two camps” poetry debates, the issue of lyric subjectivity has been of particular consequence for many contemporary women poets.

In response to the “two camps” rhetoric, over the last two decades, a new critical conversation has emerged that describes the development of a late-twentieth/early twenty-first postlanguage lyric poetry that has been variously theorized as hybrid, Elliptical, exploratory, postmodern lyric, or, more broadly, as “third way.” This emerging postlanguage poetry seeks alternative means of exploring lyric poetry and lyric subjectivity by deploying both lyric conventions and experimental formal strategies. Many contemporary women poets in particular have been instrumental in the development of postlanguage lyric poetries that neither centers on nor excises the “I.” What I find intriguing are the ongoing efforts of many contemporary women poets to explore, through aesthetic means, what poststructuralist and ethical depiction of subjectivity might look like. In other words, many women poets are taking on the serious task of imaginatively conveying a lyric subjectivity that is neither wholly constructivist nor completely autonomous. Such lyric texts reframe agency and interiority as inextricably interrelated with exteriority. Postlanguage lyric texts advance a decentered “I” that is explored affirmatively in order to advance the subject within ethical relation with the Other.

In this dissertation, I investigate some of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century poetry and poetics of three postlanguage lyric women poets—Claudia Rankine, Fanny Howe,

³ In the 1980s and early 1990s, feminist critics such as Alicia Ostriker, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Susan Stanford Friedman had championed women’s poetry, such as the work of Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, where the poet spoke from an expressive, postconfessional voice, used a plain, more “accessible” style, and often centered on overtly political themes. With the rise of poststructuralism in the academy in the 1980 and early 1990s, feminist critics such as Margaret Homans, Janet Montefiore argued that such a focus marginalized more experimental and avant-garde women’s poetry. These critics looked to work of contemporary and previous poets they argued drew on the French feminist concept of *écriture féminine*—that is, writing characterized as open, multiple, diffuse, fragmented, questioning, subversive, decentered, and nonrational.

and Elizabeth Robinson—to consider some selections of postlanguage lyric poetry in terms of their exploration of both lyric subjectivity and the ethics of reading and writing poetry. Given the critiques of Language writing and poststructuralism, how do these contemporary women poets deploy the lyric “I” ethically? In what specific ways do they broach the apparently diverging conventions and values of lyric and experimental poetics? What new models of lyric subjectivity are offered? What relations between poet and reader are articulated? What ethics do these writers draw from and/or advance?

In this project, I align myself with poetry critics who argue that innovative poetry can deploy the lyric “I” in myriad ways that replicate neither an overpowering nor a solipsistic “I.” Instead, this project explores a range of possibilities for subjectivity within poetic texts. This dissertation builds from the starting point of late-twentieth century feminist criticism on experimental women’s poetry—a discourse I will outline more fully in chapter one—that both acknowledges the value of the Language writing’s critique of the “voice poem” and affirmatively explores subjectivity. Building on the foundation of feminist criticism, I argue that the women postlanguage lyric poets I survey in this dissertation are centrally concerned with articulating the lyric “I” *ethically*.

Ethical Lyric Subjectivity

What do I mean by ethical articulations of lyric subjectivity? Centrally, contemporary lyric subjectivity is ethical insofar as displays an orientation towards otherness, in contrast to lyric poetry’s presumed inward directionality. I draw from critic Daniel Barbiero’s concept of “circumspective,” rather than “introspective” postlanguage lyric poetry. According to Barbiero, a “circumspective” lyric recognizes that the subject is inserted into a given set of circumstances. Rather than directing inward, as often understood in traditional lyric poetry: “the inner dimension

of experience is reimagined as a porous domain susceptible to partial and ongoing constitution from outgoing agencies, be these social forces, the givenness of language, or the already existing state of the discipline in which one writes” (363). Thus, the postlanguage, circumspective position allows for the lyric subject’s interiority and spirituality, while ultimately aiming for an other-orientation rather than self-absorption. Such formulations demonstrate the lyric “I” as *intersubjective*. Their formulations of lyric intersubjectivity allow postlanguage poets to explore spaces between, or alternative to, the extremes of an uncomplicated embrace of conventional subjectivity and the avant-garde rejection of the subject. Rankine, Howe, and Robinson critique what they see as narcissistic, solipsistic, and enervating articulations of the lyric “I” and/or the underlying assumptions of the Enlightenment-based “ideological I.” Their writings are also highly reflexive, signaling their awareness that the “I” is a linguistic construction. As a result, these poets aim not to express authentic feeling or experience. Rather, they signal an intentionality to construct mediated articulations of ethical lyric subjectivity. At the same time, they do not reject all qualities associated with conventional constructions of lyric subjectivity or themes. Instead, statements of sincerity, experiences of transcendence, and the exploration of subjective thought, feeling, and spirituality are present in the poems I will analyze. But this poetry does not depict a pure or universalist interiority occurring, as if in a vacuum; their texts place the lyric subject and its various experiences and modes within larger social, political, and/or discursive contexts.

Literary-Ethical Methodology

The ethical articulations of lyric subjectivity in the writings of Rankine, Howe, and Robinson are involved in a dynamic wherein reader and writer engage in an ethical encounter through the text. In order to develop such a model, I adopt a methodology of literary-ethical

inquiry as it has emerged in literary criticism in the last twenty years. The consideration of ethics and/of/in literature has developed its current shape in response to the ascendancy of poststructuralist theory and numerous politically-oriented approaches to literary criticism (including feminist, Marxist, post-colonial, race theory) in the 1970s and 1980s. Taking poststructuralist and other theoretical critiques of individualistic subjectivity as a given, intersubjective, dialogic understandings of ethics have been central to what literary critic Tim Woods identifies as a consequent “‘ethical turn’ of the late 1980s and early 1990s” (*Poetics* 10-11). The emerging model or subdiscipline of ethical approaches to literature is described by Lawrence Buell’s introduction to a 1999 special issue of *PMLA*, “Ethics and Literary Study.” Buell notes that much of the appearance of “literary-ethical inquiry” can be traced to the shift towards ethics in the work of key poststructuralist thinkers, and he identifies as central to this critical conversation Derrida’s ongoing dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas, which concluded with Derrida’s ultimate affirmation of the importance of Levinas’s ethics upon his friend’s death in his 1995 eulogy “Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas” (7).⁴ “Adieu” includes Derrida’s assertion that Levinas’s thought has “awakened” for us the theme of “an ‘unlimited’ responsibility for the other that exceeds and precedes my freedom” (*Adieu* 3). While Levinas has surfaced as a central theorist for poststructuralist literary-ethical inquiry, it must be noted that Derrida plays a significant role in this “ethical turn,” for he not only promoted Levinas’s ethics and used them as a foundation for his own writings, he also complicated Levinas’s formulation of ethics over the decades (Buell 9). Hence, the “ethical turn” in literary studies at the turn of the twenty-first century is interwoven with the “ethical turn” in poststructuralism and deconstruction, which in

⁴ Buell also notes the shift to ethics in the later works of Michel Foucault (9-10, 14). While Foucault’s ethics involves a shift from practices of domination to self-actualization, Levinas’s ethics (and Derrida’s modified adoption of them) prioritizes the subject’s responsibility to the other, and this is the theoretical lens I use to explore postlanguage poetry.

turn establishes the relevance of ethical inquiry in literary criticism. The ethical philosophies of both Levinas and Derrida provide the major framework for my own literary-ethical inquiry of postlanguage lyric poetry; I will provide an overview of their ethical concepts and terminology in chapter one.

Ethics and Politics in Literary Criticism

The “ethical turn” in literary criticism may be seen as a perhaps inevitable mode of inquiry after the destabilizations of poststructuralism, particularly the poststructuralist criticisms of the ideological “I.” Ethical-literary inquiry raises the question: after the ascendancy of poststructuralist theoretical critiques that decenter the Enlightenment/Romantic subject and undermine the concept of language as a transparent medium—commonplace stances of postmodern thought that operate largely by negation—how can a postmodern (or post-postmodern) subject be described in affirmative terms? As Woods explains, the “ethical turn” involves

a reinstatement of the responsibilities of subjectivity. However, this reinstated subject is not a sovereign, founding subject but one that is shaped by models of existence which look to aesthetic experience and its forms as ways of understanding aspects of subjectivity that are not reducible to the cognitive or the rational . . . The ‘ethical turn’ is part of an attempt to *preserve* the role of the subject in view while respecting the difference of the (other) object . . . (“The Ethical Diversity” 466-67)

Woods’s emphasis on the preservation of the subject, both in agency and in responsibility, articulates a central concern of recent literary-ethical inquiries. Critiques of powerful Western ideologies (capitalist, patriarchal, imperialistic, racist) that have emerged from politically-

oriented theories of the 1970s and 1980s tend to emphasize public discourses and institutions in their investigations of power. But what can intersubjectivity look like across both the public and private dimensions of individuals' lives? Given the demystifications of ideology and the "ideological I," how can one go about rethinking one's subjectivity and conducting a good life? Can "interpersonal" actions and communication provide helpful models of intersubjectivity? Ethical inquiry can provide terminology to examine such concerns, for ethics addresses private and public domains in ways that are not limited to investigations of the workings of power on the levels institutions and the state.

How does literary-ethical inquiry differ from politically based literary criticisms? As David Parker observes, considerations of politics and ethics cover much similar territory; he notes that critics Richard Bernstein and Wayne Booth have argued that ethics and politics are essentially inseparable (5). However, the literary-ethical inquiry of the last twenty years has emerged as a critical discourse whose aims are distinct from politically-oriented literary critical writings that aim to criticize mechanisms of power and demystify ideology (Buell 7; Parker 4). As critic G. Matthew Jenkins argues, ethics "is not reducible to politics, for one, because ethics does not involve the just distribution of resources or even a choice between two evils. Secondly, ethics does not coincide with what poststructuralists would call *the political* either because ethics for them is in essence the limit of power, not the archaeology of its workings" (7).⁵ Thus, the ends of literary-ethical inquiry are not to dissect the operations of power alone. Literary-ethical inquiry thus departs from certain strains of poststructuralist and politically based theories.

⁵ Another key distinction that emerges in literary-ethical inquiry is the one between ethics and morality. Although I acknowledge that the border between the ethical and the moral can be ambiguous, in my definition of ethics, I rely on the distinction that Derek Attridge makes, for he also works from Levinasian ethical thought, which insists that ethics involves unpredictability and risk, while morality involves "specific obligations governing concrete situations in a social context, which require the greatest possible control of outcomes" ("Innovation, Literature, Ethics" 28).

Literary-ethical inquiry presents risks, however. As Woods observes, during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, some critics considered ethics as passé, ultimately “a liberal humanist apology for the bourgeois subject” (*Poetics* 6). Parker explains that key theorists—he singles out Frederic Jameson—have vilified ethics, arguing that it is an ideological mask of hegemonic classes or groups that devise moral binary oppositions and applies the imagined quality of “evil” to the Other of the dominant group (5). Furthermore, Buell mentions the concern that a focus on ethics may possibly involve the “privatization of human relations” to such a degree that it makes “the social or political secondary” (14). While Buell’s reservation is understandable, I suggest that it is possible to see literary-ethical inquiry as a possible corrective or complement that can operate alongside politically based literary criticism. As Parker argues, literary discourse must go further than “ideological demystification,” for politics, like any belief system, can partake in self-righteous, zealous, and intolerant judgmentalism or “Pharisaism” that operates on pre-determined binary oppositions (7). I argue that it is possible to draw on the concept of interpersonal encounter in order to allow writers and readers to explore models of intersubjectivity that maintains a fundamental focus on responsibility for others. Furthermore, such models of intersubjectivity need not be limited to the realm of private or intimate relations; historical, political, and linguistic contexts can be taken into account. Of course, the specific ethical methodology makes a real difference: rather than a bourgeois/humanist “universalist” position, the ethics of Levinas and Derrida adopts an other-oriented approach (Woods *Poetics* 6-7). Thus, I argue, while poststructuralist political investigations have revealed much about constructions of subjectivity, the incorporation of other-oriented ethics provides an essential model for affirmative articulations of postmodern understandings of subjectivity that are inherently intersubjective.

The distinction between politics and ethics in literary criticism is relevant to my exploration of the specific postlanguage women poets I am studying. While adopting various political stances, all three writers investigate ways of articulating intersubjectivity in language, explore ethical interpersonal relations between self and Other, and trace the possibility of ethical encounter within literary texts. In Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, the immersion of the "I" in political and public discourses in the media-saturated, post 9/11 era is explored alongside accounts of interpersonal encounters and interrogations of the polarized oppositions drawn in the Bush era's dualistic political rhetoric. Thus, while she engages with political discourses, Rankine foregrounds the subject's ethical responsibilities to the other, in contrast to the contemporary culture of spectacle. Meanwhile, the poetic texts I examine by Fanny Howe demonstrate an overt, often didactic political stance that is informed by the writings of Liberation Theology. Her poetic texts, too, sustain a strong ethical dimension alongside political and spiritual commitments, and literary-ethical inquiry provides a valuable lens to consider Howe's spiritual model of lyric subjectivity. Finally, Elizabeth Robinson, as a less overtly political writer than Rankine and Howe, frames the ethics of her writing in terms very similar to Parker's. In other words, Robinson resists an explicitly politicized stance in her poetry, for she is instead interested in how poetry can be an ethical corrective to rigidly determined political narratives, as she recognizes that even the progressive politics with which she claims affinity can become ossified through dualistic rhetoric.

Literary-Ethical Inquiry and Modern Poetry

Over the past twenty years, a significant number of critics have engaged in literary-ethical inquiry that draws on Levinasian ethics.⁶ My application of literary-ethical inquiry to

⁶ For an earlier example of Levinasian ethics applied to literature, see Jill Robbins, *Altered Readings: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago P, 1999). Also see the critical anthology *Levinas and Twentieth Century*

modern poetry has significant predecessors. In *Ethics and Dialogue: in the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan* (2000), Michael Eskin uses Bakhtin's dialogic model of reading texts and Levinas' Other-oriented ethics to frame a reading of European poets Osip Mandel'shtam and Paul Celan. Gerald Bruns also ties Levinasian ethics to Celan's poetics to make a case that poetry can be ethical insofar as it attempts to reach towards the other. Indeed, Mandel'shtam and Celan's "message in a bottle" poetics of encounter, often refracted through Levinasian ethics, has made them important figures in ethical criticism of twentieth century poetry, as I will discuss in chapter one. While Bakhtin has emerged as an important theorist for some ethical models of poetic textuality,⁷ Levinas has emerged more frequently.⁸ Of particular relevance for my project is Woods' survey of twentieth century American poetry. Woods insists upon the centrality of Objectivism in the twentieth-century recalibration of poetic subjectivity as other-oriented ("The Ethical Diversity" 454). Woods is not alone in his emphasis of ethics in the work of the Objectivists, and George Oppen in particular; indeed, I draw on the work of various critics who trace Oppen's ethics in support of my exploration of Fanny Howe's poetry in chapter two.⁹ G. Matthew Jenkins also uses Levinas' ethics to provide an ethical critical reading of Objectivist poets, and he then traces a lineage through postwar experimental twentieth-century poetry, concluding with the avant-garde poetry of Susan Howe and the Language writing of Lyn Hejinian. While I am indebted to Woods and Jenkins' work in their application of Levinasian

Literature: Ethics and the Reconstitution of Subjectivity, edited by Donald R. Wehrs (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2013).

⁷ Another critic who uses Bakhtin to argue for a dialogic model of ethics applied to modern poetry is Mara Scanlon, in "Ethics and the Lyric: Form, Dialogue, Answerability," *College Literature* 34.1 (2007): 1-22. Also, like Eskin, N.S. Boone draws on both Bakhtin's dialogism and Levinas's concept of alterity in order to foreground what he sees as William Carlos Williams' focus on the "humanism of the other man" in *Paterson* ("Paterson as a Satirical Work: Epistemology of the Dance," in Wehrs, 133-156).

⁸ Another notable example of Levinasian-based, literary-ethical inquiry applied to contemporary poetry is Xiaojing Zhou's *The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity in Asian American Poetry* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2006).

⁹ See *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*. Eds. DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, and Peter Quartermain. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1999, in particular, the essays by Peter Nicholls, "Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen" (240-253) and Alan Golding, "George Oppen's Serial Poems" (240-53).

ethics to poetic subjectivity, my project differs from theirs most notably as their trajectories conclude with considerations of Language poets or, in the case of Susan Howe, a contemporary poet who is often considered as “experimental” rather than either “lyric” or participating in both experimental and lyric traditions. My project, in light of the critical debates surrounding “third way” or “hybrid” poetry that I will discuss in chapter one, extends Levinasian ethics to considerations of the postlanguage lyric, which I argue is highly invested in ethical articulations of lyric subjectivity. In my project, I suggest that the postlanguage lyric poets I investigate actively and self-consciously seek to transform the lyric through the form and content of their texts by moving to both the ethical articulation of the lyric “I” and the enactment of intersubjective relations between self and other, writer and reader.

Gender, Ethics and Postlanguage Lyric Poetry

Given that all of the postlanguage lyric poetry that I consider in this dissertation is women’s poetry, what role does gender play in their ethical projects? I must note that, while Rankine, Howe, and Robinson focus on gender—specifically, women’s experiences—more explicitly elsewhere in their writings,¹⁰ gender issues are not foregrounded in the specific poetic texts that I examine in this dissertation. However, I maintain that it is not necessary for gender to be a central focus for there to be a feminist sensibility brought to a particular poetic project. In chapter one, I will trace in more detail the discourse surrounding contemporary women’s poetry and the lyric “I” that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s—that is, in the wake of both second wave feminism and the Language school’s critique of conventional lyric subjectivity. I position my reading of Rankine, Howe, and Robinson’s writings with what Lisa Sewell identifies in the introduction to the poetry anthology *Eleven More American Women Poets* as a marker of third

¹⁰ All three poets I explore do foreground gender concerns elsewhere in their writings. For example, all three address experiences of pregnancy, motherhood, or domesticity, as in Fanny Howe’s *O’Clock* (1995), Claudia Rankine’s *Plot* (2001), and Elizabeth Robinson’s *Under that Silky Roof* (2006).

wave feminism that is present in many innovative women's poetries. Third wave feminism, Sewell argues, is evident in such writings as they showcase feminism as "an always already jumping-off point" and is not based on common second-wave feminist themes such as "bodily experience, shared oppressions and identity politics," but on a feminist sensibility that seeks intersubjective models of interaction that avoid binaries (5). In other words, the ethical articulations of the lyric "I" in Rankine, Howe, and Robinson's writings shift towards subjectivity that does not produce a new male/female binary, and therefore do not produce the *opposite* of the masculine lyric "I" with a subjectivity that is necessarily identifiable as female/feminine. Instead, these writings explore a lyric "I" that is open to the recognition of alterity of the Other as constitutive of subjectivity itself.

Another way that an implicit feminism may be present in the selected writings of Rankine, Howe, and Robinson concerns the interrelation of private and the public discourses and experiences. I have already noted a division between literary-ethical inquiry and politically based literary criticism. This distinction of the ethical—often inclusive of the interpersonal—and the political raises the specter of the old binary of private/public "spheres," which have traditionally been gendered as feminine/masculine. However, I aim to avoid replicating the outmoded, private/public binary with an ethical/political binary. Of course, second wave feminism in particular did much to link the personal and political and, as literary critic Clair Wills observes, social changes throughout the twentieth century did much to make the public/private divide obsolete; thus, "there isn't a pristine sphere of the lyric self which is not politicized and constructed" (39). I suggest that innovative poetry of Rankine, Howe, and Robinson that I select for this project foreground the ways in which public and private discourses and experiences are interwoven within the subject. In this way, these poets continue an ongoing feminist dimension

of innovative women's poetry that Sewell identifies. Further, I read the importance of interpersonal encounter in the writings of the postlanguage lyric women poets I have selected as a response to the tendencies of much (predominantly male-authored) Language/avant-garde writing and certain influential thinkers of poststructuralism—such as Foucault and certain Marxist thinkers (Althusser, DeBord, Baudrillard)—to diminish subjective agency while emphasizing state and institutional structures. There can be an implicit feminism within the move to illustrate, not the already established notion that the personal is political, but that a focus on interpersonal relations can complement and inform the political.

At the same time, the arguments I make in the course of this dissertation largely rest on ethical philosophies of Levinas and Derrida's Levinasian-based ethics, not feminist theories. Many feminist critics, beginning with his contemporary, Simone de Beauvoir, have understandably accused Levinas of androcentrism and chauvinism because of numerous instances of sexist language in his writings. Particularly problematic was his use of the "feminine" in *Totality and Infinity* to describe alterity in a way that reinforces patriarchal notions of femininity as mysterious and ineffable (Chanter 25). Nevertheless, as feminist scholar Tina Chanter suggests, it is possible to allow an ambivalent or even generous reading of Levinas's treatment of the feminine, as indeed Derrida does in the *Adieu*, where he sees the potential tie between feminine/feminism and the foundation of the category of the ethical (17). In another vein, feminist critic Diane Perpich argues that Levinas's thinking can be allied with feminism. Perpich asserts that Levinas's ethics can improve upon approaches to identity politics that rely on fixed notions of gender because Levinas's notion of alterity allows us "to do justice both to the uniqueness of individual lives and to the ways in which those lives are embedded, for better and worse, within social, cultural and religious communities" (28). Sewell also cites Levinas's notion

of alterity to reference the tendency in innovative contemporary American women's poetry to "enact, represent, or recognize radical, unassimilable difference" (2). In my readings of postlanguage lyric poetry by women, I similarly posit that Levinasian ethics can be used as a theoretical framework that describes models of subjectivity as constituted through encounters with alterity. Using this ethical framework, I demonstrate how the poets Rankine, Howe, and Robinson, participate in the ongoing, implicitly feminist project in innovative women's poetry to reconceptualize the lyric "I" through the exploration of both interpersonal encounters and public discourses.

Overview of the Chapters

In chapter one, I preface my analysis of the writings of Rankine, Howe, and Robinson with a selection of broader literary contexts and critical discourses that provide the theoretical foundation for my argument. In order to clarify key definitions and familiarize the reader with specific literary and methodological discourses, I provide an overview of major topics, including the poststructuralist critique of subjectivity, the literary history of definitions of lyric poetry, the influential Language school critiques of lyric poetry, and the discourses surrounding contemporary American innovative and hybrid/third way poetics. Furthermore, chapter one includes a summary of the ethical theories of Levinas and Derrida, which provide the theoretical framework of this project, as well as an overview of significant criticism that applies ethical concepts to literary texts. Of particular note is the work of feminist poet-critic Joan Retallack, for her concept of *poethics*, which foregrounds the ethical uses of language as it applies to the writing and reading of contemporary poetic texts, offers a foundational concept for my interpretation of postlanguage lyric poetry by Rankine, Howe, and Robinson.

In chapter two, I offer a poethical reading of Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004) that explores the text's depiction of how various American cultural discourses in the 9/11 era—political rhetoric, news media, consumer capitalism, popular culture—shape contemporary American understandings of the “ideological ‘I.’” I then go on to argue that the text re-thinks the “I” in ethical terms by offering a model of a self-reflexive, fragmented subject that emerges from within discursive contexts and interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, I suggest that *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* asserts the relationality and response-ability of the subject as it emphasizes the importance of ethical practice. Rankine advances the activities of writing and reading poetry as ethical practice in two ways. First, Rankine gestures to the potential for the speaking subject to serve as poetic witness, rather than as an enervated spectator. Second, Rankine advances the concept of the lyric text as the enactment of ethical encounter by directly introducing the ideas of two writers, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and poet Paul Celan. The thinking of Levinas and Celan, on ethics and poetics, respectively, provide the basis for a model of the lyric as ethical encounter between writer and reader. The Levinasian-Celanian model of postlanguage lyric poetry delineated in *DLMBL* will then serve as a paradigm that my readings of other poetic texts in this dissertation will both follow and depart from.

In chapter three, I consider Fanny Howe's deployment of the lyric subject in order to investigate her poethics as illustrated in selections from Howe's later works of poetry, prose-poetry, and poetics, specifically those that are reprinted or originally appear in *Selected Poems* (2000), *The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life* (2003), and *On the Ground* (2004). I seek to illuminate Howe's poethics by tracing her poetry's inheritance of Oppen's Objectivist ethical focus on poetry writing, its demonstration of the influence of liberation theology, and its resonances with the transcendental ethics of Levinas. I suggest that Howe's ethical recalibration

of lyric subjectivity is demonstrated through her characterization of the wandering lyric subject. Also significant is Howe's use of serial (or what she terms "spiral") form, for many literary critics have theorized serial form as fundamentally ethical in its resistance to the domineering claims of the speaking subject or reductive classifications of otherness. Furthermore, Howe's spiritual poetry presents alternatives to certain avant-garde/Language school strictures in that it registers and rethinks the lyric subject's interrelated experiences of exteriority *and* interiority, immanence *and* transcendence.

In chapter four, I consider the *poethics* of selections of Elizabeth Robinson's writings from *Counterpart* (2012), *On Ghosts* (2013), and *Apostrophe* (2006). In this final chapter, I shift from a Levinasian-Celanian model of lyric as ethical encounter to consider Derrida's thinking on ethics, deconstruction, and *hauntology*. Derrida's ethics deploy a subjectivity that is Levinasian insofar as it focuses on the self's obligation for the other. At the same time, Derrida complicates some of the utopian overtones of Levinas and Celan's paradigms for relation between self and other, writer and reader by insisting on the persistence of individual difference and potential conflict within all interactions. Through a consideration of Derrida's deconstructive theory of the doubleness of language, I argue that Robinson draws on the figure of the double in her often allusive poetry in order to reconfigure the lyric "I" as a site of doubleness and difference. Consequently, lyric self-encounter need not be solely inward, for it can demonstrate ethical engagement between the subject and her surroundings. I then examine Robinson's poetic explorations of lyric textuality and lyric subjectivity through the lens of Derrida's ethics, including the concepts of radical hospitality, the gift, and *hauntology*. Derridean *hauntology* is a theoretical approach that uses the trope of the unstable ghost who, akin to both the Levinasian Other and a figure of deconstruction, is neither fully absent nor present, but nevertheless delivers

ethical injunctions. Finally, I investigate Robinson's treatment of lyric address, which considers how the constructions of lyric subjectivity and lyric voice both gesture to the writing subject and are constituted through the reception of the reader as they emerge between the events of reading and writing. Robinson emphasizes that the text is a space that holds potential for encounter and carries the possibility that, as reader and writer, the text can be a place where "we do / not meet" (*Apostrophe* 72).

These three poets present a range of figurations of the lyric "I": Rankine's lyric subject is fragmented, flattened, and diminished; Howe's lyric subject dynamically wanders across serial/spiral lyrics; and Robinson's lyric subject hovers between absence and presence and registers the uncanny interplay of familiarity and dissonance. Certain qualities of these poets' lyric subjects underscore their shared concerns as postlanguage lyric poets. For example, all three deploy a high degree of reflexivity in their deployments of lyric subjectivity and lyric voice, for their writings demonstrate the writers' awareness that these models are linguistic constructs. Furthermore, all three poets are interested in the lyric subject as constituted by the interrelation between exteriority and interiority, and Howe and Robinson in particular explore how mystical experiences link exteriority and interiority. Also, all three poets engage in extensive intertextuality that advances an ethical model of writing that demonstrates how the poet's texts are always informed by interactions with other texts. The wide-ranging allusiveness in Rankine, Howe, and Robinson's writings demonstrate how writing is necessarily communal, rather than self-created or individualistic. As such, I suggest that the writings of Rankine, Howe, and Robinson demonstrate a key feature of "hybrid" or "third way" poetry: the inclination to draw from a wide variety of previous writings and build on both lyric and experimental

techniques, in order to construct a postlanguage lyric poetry that advances ethical articulations of the lyric “I.”

CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS: CONTEMPORARY SUBJECTIVITY, WHERE LYRIC MEETS LANGUAGE, AND THE ETHICS OF POETIC ENCOUNTER

In this opening chapter, I preface my analysis of poetry by Rankine, Howe, and Robinson with an overview of literary contexts and critical discourses that inform my readings. This chapter is designed to clarify several key definitions and to familiarize the reader with the range of critical discourses I draw on throughout the subsequent chapters. As the lyric “I” is a topic central to classifications of contemporary poetry, I begin with the broad issue of subjectivity. What exactly do I mean by the conventional model of subjectivity that has come under attack in poststructuralism? What thinking about subjectivity has emerged in the wake of the poststructuralist theories? I then turn to another important definitional question: what is lyric poetry? In order to describe conventional lyric poetry, I provide a summary of various definitions of the lyric as it has developed in literary criticism since Romanticism, the late-twentieth critical debates surrounding the “two camp” model of contemporary poetry, and responses to the “two camp” division in contemporary innovative women’s poetry and feminist criticism. I also provide a brief overview of the 1980s’ text *My Life* by Language poet Lyn Hejinian, for it serves as an important predecessor to the postlanguage women’s poetry I examine in this dissertation. Furthermore, the critical reception of *My Life* provides an important foundation to my own inquiry about lyric subjectivity in contemporary women’s poetry. After this discussion, I then trace the emergent, twenty-first century discourse of “hybrid” or “third way” poetry in order to elucidate what I mean by postlanguage lyric poetry in particular.

After arriving at the contemporary moment of discourse on poetic subjectivity, I shift to literary-ethical inquiry by providing an overview of the major ethical concepts and terminology

that I employ in the readings of specific poems in later chapters. First, I include a discussion of Levinas and Derrida, the major theorists of contemporary ethics whose writings I draw upon to establish a guiding framework in this project. I then conclude this chapter by providing an overview of some of the poets and critics who provide valuable models for conceptualizing reading and writing literary texts and/or lyric poetry as ethical encounter, including Paul Celan, Joan Retallack, Mutlu Konuk Blasing, Derek Attridge, Scott Brewster, and William Waters. I draw on the work of these writers in order to explicate specific considerations related to the application of ethics to literary texts. In particular, these literary-ethical concepts enable me to position postlanguage lyric poetry as a rhetorical/performative construct that can be a site of ethical encounter between writer and reader.

Conceptualizing Subjectivity

The notion of a unified self that exists independently from social contexts is rooted in philosophical and ideological traditions in the West. While there are many different ways of considering the self, very influential are what philosopher Susan Brison calls “traditional accounts” of subjectivity that have been delineated in metaphysics since the Enlightenment era. Exemplified by the Cartesian *cogito*, the concept of the self as a kind of metaphysical substance, this traditional model views the “self as individualistic” and “assumes one can individuate selves and determine the criteria for identity over time independent of social context” (Brison 41). These traditional or metaphysical accounts of selfhood privilege the mind over the body or material world. Sociologist Ian Burkitt points out that, in addition to the metaphysical concept of the Cartesian *cogito*, another traditional account of subjectivity in the West is fundamentally ideological and can be captured in political philosopher’s C.B. Macpherson’s term, ““possessive individualism,”” a type of individualism found in capitalist societies and built on the conviction

that “each individual is thought to be the possessor of their own skills or capacities, owing nothing to society for the development of these” (2). According to the social psychologist John Shotter, possessive individualism also sets up a dichotomy of the internal mind as separate from, and superior to, the external, material world. He argues that the pervasive belief in possessive individualism encourages us to account “for our experience of ourselves . . . in such an individualistic way . . . as if we all existed from birth as separate, isolated individuals *already* containing ‘minds’ or ‘mentalities’ wholly within ourselves, set over against a material world itself devoid of any mental processes” (136). Traditional accounts of subjectivity in the post-Enlightenment West, then, posit a universal notion of selfhood: unified, stable across time, ahistorical, and disembodied. Moreover, these traditional accounts encourage a highly individualistic worldview that resists acknowledgement of the influence of the material world or social relations with others.

Poststructuralist and postmodern theorists in the latter half of the twentieth century have challenged the philosophical and ideological assumptions behind traditional notions of subjectivity.¹¹ In poststructuralist academic discourse, subjectivity in the twenty-first century is now commonly seen as dispersed rather than coherent, decentered rather than stable, historically and ideologically contextualized rather than universal and ahistorical, and embodied rather than purely metaphysical. However, while the characterization of subjectivity has been challenged within academic discourse, in the words of literary critic Paul John Eakin, an “enduring vitality of the myth of autonomy” persists in Western culture (62). The cultural mythology that undergirds the traditional accounts of subjectivity is particularly relevant to the activity of writing because, as Shotter observes, the myth of autonomy is born in and reinforced through

¹¹ I am referring to the rejection of traditional notions of individualistic subjectivity found in the work of poststructuralist and postmodern theorists since the 1970s, notably in the work of Lacan, Derrida, Althusser, Foucault, and Barthes, as well as in the work of many feminist, postcolonial, and queer theorists.

language. Shotter argues that we are disciplined to talk as if we are self-determined individuals by processes of “social accountability”: “what we talk of *as* our experience of our reality is constituted for us largely by the *already established* ways in which we *must* talk in our attempts to *account* for ourselves . . . to the others around us. [. . .] And only certain ways of talking are deemed legitimate . . . [so] our understanding, and apparently our experience of ourselves, *will be constrained also*” [emphasis in the original] (140, 141). Thus, through language, we are socially trained to see ourselves as products of self-determination, and, consequently, conditioned *not* to see relationality in subjectivity.¹² Furthermore, the “myth of autonomy,” made commonplace through everyday language, is far from neutral. Burkitt argues that possessive individualism is pernicious for it is “a political theory that distorts human nature, because each one of us develops our capacities in society” (2-3).

While one can observe the persistence of the “myth of autonomy” despite the advent of poststructuralism, this is not to say that philosophical and political critique can have no bearing on lived experience, or that theoretical, academic discourses exist separately from everyday life. On the contrary, it is important to underscore the link between metaphysical and ideological concepts of subjectivity on the one hand and lived experience on the other. As Burkitt argues, the way we think about the self and the way we experience the self mutually influence one another through language:

¹² Shotter is not the first to discuss how ideological concepts of subjectivity are shaped through discourse; the works of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser are foundational and widely influential. But, as Eakin argues, Shotter’s description has advantages over these theorists: “In contrast to the comparatively abstract analyses of Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser, which unfold at the level of social institutions and the state, Shotter’s focus on the structure of interpersonal communication models the interface between the individual and culture with a telling immediacy” (63). Moreover, Burkitt argues that Foucault’s arguments rely on “under-emphasis on relations to others, and also the over-extension of forms of scientific, medical and legal knowledge and practice to constitute the whole of experience and of the self” (102). I read the writings of Rankine, Howe, Robinson as drawing on interpersonal experiences and communications (or lack of them); thus, I preface my reading of these poets’ writings with Shotter, Burkitt, and, as I will indicate below, Charles Taylor’s articulations of subjectivity and language.

... while some ideological and metaphysical abstractions, which need to be critiqued, have acted upon individuals in everyday life, shaping self-identities, there is a reciprocal relation between political and philosophical abstraction on the one hand, and everyday life and selfhood on the other. The two inform each other, with ideas about what it is to be a self that emerge from everyday social relations seeping into concepts of the self in the social sciences, psychology and the humanities, while these concepts can then filter back into everyday understandings of who we are. (27)

According to Burkitt, notions about selfhood are not proscribed by philosophers and political ideologues and imposed upon a passive populace; they are articulated and circulate through all sorts of discourses, formal and informal, official and unofficial. Both Shotter and Burkitt argue that we need to reconceptualize the self as relational rather than individualistic, and that we can reframe how we consider language as rhetorical and dialogic acts in order to orient our concept of selfhood as intersubjective. Furthermore, contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor takes up similar considerations in his project to revise subjectivity in the wake of poststructuralism. Taylor sees that, while the conventional subject—stable, unified, and in control of language—is problematic, so is the other extreme, articulated by some proponents of poststructuralism, where language is a code that completely constructs and dominates the subject, thus stripping it of agency.¹³ Taylor seeks a space between the two extreme positions of sovereign or powerless subjectivity by observing that we are only deliberating selves or agents insofar as we are parts of a language community, what he calls social “webs of interlocution” (qtd. in Parker 10). Thus, the

¹³ Poetry critic Charles Altieri puts the challenge to articulate subjectivity in positive terms in another way: how to move beyond “the standard postmodernist slogans content with claims that the subject is irreducibly decentred, and hence bound to oscillate between anxious instability and provisional ingenuity” (“What difference can contemporary poetry make in our moral thinking?” 141n2).

self emerges through ongoing, dialogic processes. The analyses of Shotter, Burkitt, and Taylor on language and subjectivity preface my reading of Rankine, Howe, and Robinson, for their poetry demonstrates reciprocal relations between the philosophical ideological critiques of subjectivity and the experience of everyday life.¹⁴ In particular, these poets investigate how the myth of possessive individualism persists with a particular tenacity in American culture through a multitude of textual forms and everyday uses of language, as reinforced in speech, media, and commonplace narratives. Rankine, Howe, and Robinson seek to use language in innovative ways to reconceptualize the idea of the self as intersubjective, and, correspondingly, the lyric subject as ethically engaged.

Definitions of Lyric

What is the relation between “traditional accounts” of subjectivity and lyric poetry? First of all, it is important to consider what is meant by lyric poetry. It might seem easy to identify lyric poetry— notions that spring to mind include brevity, an emphasis on the melodious qualities of language, emotional intensity, and the expression of thoughts and feelings from a first-person perspective. However, contemporary critics routinely comment on how notoriously difficult it is to define lyric because critical discourses surrounding the term emphasize a range of attributes and, consequently, engender much confusion.¹⁵

¹⁴ While Shotter, Burkitt, and Taylor are not the first to theorize intersubjectivity. For example, mid-twentieth century psychoanalysts Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott contributed to theories of intersubjectivity. However, I find the articulations of intersubjectivity in the writings of Shotter, Burkitt, and Taylor to be helpful because, as contemporary thinkers, they frame their observations in response to poststructuralist discourses.

¹⁵ Definitional claims of the lyric draw on an extensive critical history. While Willis and Barbiero offer abbreviated versions in their essays, in the critical anthology, *The Lyric Theory Reader*, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins include several introductory and theoretical sections where they outline various approaches to definitions of the lyric even as they observe how “notoriously difficult” it is (1). In broader terms, Scott Brewster also outlines critical perceptions of the difficulty of the definition of lyric, including René Welleck’s argument that “One must abandon attempts to define the general nature of the lyric and the lyrical. Nothing beyond generalities of the tritest kind can result from it” (*Lyric* 4).

One can turn to mid-twentieth century critic M.H. Abrams for a succinct description of lyric as “any short poem presenting a single speaker (not necessarily the poet himself) who expresses a state of mind involving thought or feeling” (*Glossary* 48). While Abrams’ articulation is useful as a conventional definition of lyric, many of the assumptions underlying this understanding of lyric as “expressive” have been contested. In contrast to an understanding that emphasizes lyric as expression, some contemporary critics emphasize lyric’s performative or rhetorical dimensions. This performative character is present in the etymology of the term: “lyric” is derived from the ancient Greek term “lyre,” which indicates poetry that is performed with musical accompaniment. While the association between lyric and music lives on today, with the term “lyric” used for the words sung in popular and folk music, twentieth and twenty-first century lyric poetry is often produced primarily in textual print form, without musical accompaniment (Brewster 2). However, even as a textual form, lyric can be understood to be performative. Furthermore, while lyric has often been considered to be timeless, clearly the term “lyric” is historically contingent and has changed over time. Literary critic Scott Brewster argues that, in the West, it has always been changing, emerging in multifarious forms in different historical eras and cultures, dating back to ancient Greece. Brewster traces a genealogy of what he considers to be various lyric forms through Western history, including the ceremonial, elegiac, and oratorical verses of antiquity, the troubadours’ songs and religious hymns of the medieval era, the courtly love sonnets of early modern times, the neoclassical odes of the eighteenth century, and the vast majority of poetry in the Romantic and post-Romantic era (17-32). In broader terms, Mutlu Konuk Blasing similarly argues that the “lyric is a foundational genre, and its history spans millennia; it comprises a wide variety of practices, ranging in the West from Sappho to rap” (4). Brewster and Blasing’s descriptions of the lyric as encompassing

diverse forms through history and across cultures is important, for they do so while emphasizing lyric's roots as a discursive or rhetorical mode that is fundamentally performative and therefore concerned with address to readership. Furthermore, in *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*, William Waters also argues for an understanding of lyric (a term he uses interchangeably with "poetry") as tending toward address of the reader (1-2 n.2). In his concentration on poems that employ the vocative, Waters cites examples from across European languages and time periods from antiquity to the mid-twentieth-century. Thus, his argument rests on the idea that lyric extends across a multiplicity of subgenres throughout Western history, but that there is an overall tendency of lyric poetry to reach or call to the reader.

In contrast, in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005), Virginia Jackson argues that the idea of lyric poetry as the oldest form of literary expression is in fact a modern, post-Enlightenment invention that developed through nineteenth and twentieth century reading practices and critical discourses.¹⁶ Jackson contends that, through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, critical reading practices effectively contributed to the "lyricization" of a vast array of various types of poetry—hymns, ballads, odes, elegies, drinking songs, etc. (8). As a result, "lyric" emerged as what Gerard Genette calls an "*archigenre*" or all-encompassing term that overarches and retrospectively includes a plethora of empirically observed cultural forms (Jackson and Prins 12). While one might be tempted to place all the responsibility on the New Critics for this abstraction of the lyric, in the introduction to the critical anthology, *The Lyric Theory Reader*, Jackson and co-editor Yopie Prins acknowledge New Criticism as quite significant but also as one "part of a longer history of abstraction in which various verse genres...were collapsed into a large, lyricized idea of poetry as such" (5). In their respective

¹⁶ Jackson's influential argument has been seen as heralding the "New Lyric Studies," which is also the name of the January 2008 issue of *PMLA* (123.1) that offers various perspectives on current lyric studies.

arguments, Brewster and Jackson concur that “lyric” has ascended to become the dominant descriptor for the vast majority of poetries since Romanticism, but they differ on whether or not one can accurately define the comparatively richer array of earlier, pre-Romantic poetic forms as “lyric.” Consequently, they disagree on the relative value of “lyric” as an umbrella term; while Brewster views this as an indicator of lyric’s strength (4), to Jackson, “lyricization” narrows a richer and more historically contextualized understanding of a great number of poetic forms, reinforcing the notion of lyric as a “temporally self-present or unmediated” (9). Furthermore, while Jackson argues that referring to pre-Romantic forms anachronistically and reductively applies a modern concept onto earlier literary forms, for her part, Blasing counters that “[h]istoricizing’ the lyric as essentially a late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European invention in effect universalizes a historically and geographically specific model of a subject. And the term ‘lyric,’ still used in this sense, has come to serve as an ideological weapon in the ongoing politicized poetry wars” (4). In other words, although Jackson’s argument claims to honor modern lyric’s mutability, in its bid to historicize the lyric, it ultimately reifies the conventional identification of lyric as Romantic monologue and lyric subjectivity as directed inward. It is indeed this conventional version of the lyric that has become a flashpoint in the “two camps” debates. As such, Jackson’s compelling argument does not illuminate the projects of twenty-first century postlanguage lyric poets who seek to preserve the lyric as a category while expanding upon the possibilities for lyric subjectivities. In contrast, Brewster, Blasing, and Waters provide valuable models for reading lyric poems in their discursive, performative, and/or rhetorical dimensions, and these models rest on considerations of lyric that extend throughout a broader history, before, during, and after Romanticism. I will turn to a fuller explanation of Brewster, Blasing, and Waters’ models of lyric as rhetorical construct and such models’ relations

to the ethics of lyric poetry towards the end of this chapter. But first, to convey what is at stake with these various readings of the lyric, it is important to delineate the definition of lyric poetry and the critical narrative of lyric subjectivity as rooted in theories and practices shaped in the Romantic period and developed through the influence of, or reaction against, Romanticism and post-Romanticism as it came to be understood across the following two centuries of literary criticism.

Romantic Lyric Poetry and Subjectivity

Poetry written during the Romantic era is central to the modern literary critical concept of the lyric poem as organized around a lyric “I.” The Romantic lyric subject has often been characterized as rooted in the “traditional account” of subjectivity, that is, the post-Enlightenment model of a coherent, autonomous, static, uniquely individualized subjectivity that is capable of transcending bodily, material, and/or social realities. Thus, the conventional lyric “I” is identified with the private interiority of a solitary self. Consequently, the lyric has often been understood to be a direct, sincere, and self-revelatory expression or utterance of thoughts and feelings that emerges from a pure interiority. A key figure in Romantic poetry’s elevation and autobiographical identification of the lyric poet is William Wordsworth, who famously defines poetry in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” which is then “recollected in tranquility,” at which time the poet contemplates and “gradually produces” an emotion, similar to the original, in his mind (756). Romantic verse, as defined and, in select examples, produced by Wordsworth, has often been interpreted as the paradigm for modern lyric poetry as more or less direct expression of the poet’s feelings and

thoughts.¹⁷ Furthermore, many critics have characterized Romantic lyric subjectivity as one that aims to transcend material/social conditions through the workings of the mind.

Another quality that has come to be identified with lyric poetry is its status as a monologic genre. Victorian writer John Stuart Mill influentially promoted lyric as specifically monologic. Mill's writings on poetry, which draw on the work of canonical Romantic poets, contribute greatly to the idea of lyric poetry as solitary, expressive, authentic speech. Mill distinguishes between rhetoric and poetry in the statement that "eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*" and his assertion that "[p]oetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude," which thus situates readers as eavesdroppers (12). For a text to be classified as poetry, and not "eloquence" or rhetoric, Mill argues that the "act of utterance" should be an end in itself, not "a means to an end" to influence the feelings, beliefs, or actions of others (13). Mill's formulations have remained influential through much of twentieth century criticism. For example, in 1957, structuralist critic Northrop Frye takes Mill's formulation one step further, arguing that poetry "preeminently the utterance that is overheard" for "the poet, so to speak, turns his back on his listeners" (32). Thus, by the mid-twentieth century, lyric, as derived from Romanticism, was routinely understood to be a monologic genre that articulated the direct expression of the poet's feelings; indeed, this characterization of lyric poetry has lingered through the late-twentieth century.

It is important to note, however, that the idea of "Romantic verse" is a "retrospective construction" that later readers place on Romantic poetry (Brewster 74). Indeed, the conventional idea of Romantic lyric verse can be identified as a sub-type of Romantic poem that Abrams defined as a paradigmatic "greater Romantic lyric" in the essay "Structure and Style in the

¹⁷ While certain poems of Wordsworth arguably exemplify his poetics—for example, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"—not all do; Wordsworth's poems in *Lyrical Ballads*, for example, demonstrate a more complex relation between lyric subjectivity and poetic composition.

Greater Romantic Lyric.”¹⁸ This type of “descriptive-meditative poem” presents “a determinate speaker in a particularized, and usually a localized, outdoor setting, whom we overhear as he carries on, in a fluent vernacular which rises easily to a more formal speech, a sustained colloquy, sometimes with himself or with the outer scene, but more frequently with a silent human auditor, present or absent” (528, 527). In its depiction of a speaker communing with nature, the poem focuses on the workings of the speaker’s mind, which culminates in an epiphany as the “lyric speaker achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem” (528). The “greater Romantic lyric,” Abrams argues, showcases the Romantics’ humanism, for the speaker/poet’s interaction with the “non-human” ultimately serves only as “the occasion for the activity which defines man: thought, the process of intellection” (528). Another way of looking at the Romantic lyric subject in the “greater Romantic lyric” is an “I” who engages with exteriority only to turn inward, thereby assimilating alterity to the sameness of the self. Abrams’ description of the “greater Romantic lyric” thus conjures qualities frequently ascribed to all Romantic and post-Romantic poetics, including interiority, sincerity, stasis, unique individuality, union with nature, and an idealized and/or idyllic vision of transcendent experience, centrally focused on the spiritual/meditative experience of the lyric subject’s mind. However, “the greater Romantic lyric” is only one type of Romantic lyric poem, and the focus on this type overlooks the poetry and poetics of even traditionally canonical Romantic poets. For example, Byron’s darkly ironic, narrative-driven long poems resist the sincerity of the “greater Romantic lyric,” and, in a letter to Richard Wodehouse, John Keats explicitly rejects what later come to be seen as conventional ideas of

¹⁸ For examples of “greater Romantic lyric,” Abrams cites (among others) Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” and “Ode: Intimations of Immortality”; Coleridge’s “Eolian Harp” and “Dejection: An Ode”; Shelley’s “Stanzas Written in Dejection,” and “Ode to the West Wind”; and Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” Abrams notes that Byron did not write in this mode (527).

Romantic subjectivity in his denunciation of what he saw as the “wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” and an embrace of his role as a “camelion [*sic*] Poet” which advances a depersonalized, textual lyric subjectivity: “it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character”” (*Letters* 172).¹⁹ Despite the wide range of actual Romantic poetry and poetics, Romantic lyric—and, subsequently, all lyric poetry—came to be understood in the terms that Abrams describes.

In the mid-twentieth century, the New Critics did much to perpetuate the identification of the lyric with the “greater Romantic lyric” (Jackson and Prins 5). As Jackson and Prins observe, the New Critics also played a major pedagogical role in developing a very influential twentieth-century model of reading lyric poetry as dramatic monologue, in which the lyric “I” is a persona who is distinct from the poet and is therefore “a fictional person of all times and all places, the first-person speaker of the lyric could speak to no one in particular and thus to all of us” (5). This model was no doubt influenced by the New Critical embrace of “depersonalized,” “High Modernist” poetry of the early twentieth century, where the “I” adopted an elaborate persona or mask that might be mythological, shifting, or decentered (Brewster 97-8). However, a range of American poetic movements emerged in the mid-twentieth century that reacted against, or significantly modified, earlier poetic and critical models of modernist depersonalization and personae-based poetics. Notably, confessionalism came to dominate mid-twentieth century American poetry. In the 1970s and 1980s, Language writers, and critics who championed them,

¹⁹ I am providing a broad *overview* that mentions only a few of the traditionally canonical British Romantic poets. Within scholarship on Romanticism, the conventional view of Romantic lyric subjectivity has been considerably challenged by, for example, feminist critics such as Anne K. Mellor who observe the construction of a great variety of female subjectivities in the work of many British Romantic women poets, such as Anna Barbauld and Mary Robinson (*Romanticism & Gender*, New York: Routledge, 1993). Another case that argues for the presence of outward and dynamic articulations of Romantic subjectivities, even in the work of canonical poets, can be found in Jefferey Cane Robinson’s *Unfettered Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism* (Gordonsville, VA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

singled out for attack what they called the “voice poem,” a type of poetic text linked to both confessionalism and the Romantic lineage of lyric poetry.

The Language School Critique

The practitioners and critical advocates of Language writing have posed significant critiques of poetry as practiced in dominant modes of production and reception in mid-late twentieth century U.S. Emerging in the 1970s and early 1980s in the Bay Area, New York, and Toronto, the movement that became known as Language writing or Language poetry involved writing that adopted a wide range of styles and forms (McCaffrey 141). Language poetry inclines toward syncretism, collage, and the adoption of multiple discourses in poetry that is widely noted for its “designed opacity and strategic unworkability within normative readerly expectations” (McCaffrey 151).²⁰ Thus, as Language poet and critic Steve McCaffery notes, the Language school lacks a “unitary poetic” (151). However, Language writers have been classified as a movement insofar as they are united in their commitment to language as the central concern of poetic activity and their shared understanding—shaped by poststructuralist and Marxist theories—“that language was not a neutral conduit for ideas or feelings but an active agent ... in the social construction and the real” (McCaffrey 143). Thus, Language writers assert that the political possibilities of poetry could be re-envisioned and expanded through the relation of the notion of communication “to textual materiality and production” (McCaffrey 143).

The stance of the Language writers involves the rejection of the “so-called voice poem.” According to its Language detractors, the “voice poem” assumes a model of communication wherein an essentially dictatorial poet directly conveys a message or emotion to a disempowered reader through the transparent, neutral conduit of language (Hartley xii). Furthermore, in this

²⁰ Language poems can make for a challenging read; they are also known for “their indeterminate pronoun relations, catachresis, a preference for parataxis ... and non-syllogistic articulations ... over grammatical and clausal subordination (hypotaxis), and extreme disjunction” (McCaffrey 151-52).

model, both poet and reader are assumed to be self-present subjects (Hartley xii). Language writers argue that their poetry, because of its density and disruptions to readers' expectations, does not involve a (self-present) poet directing readers through the overdetermined literary or rhetorical cues of a "closed"/unitary/commodified text. Instead, Language writing promotes active collaboration between reader and writer in what Language poet Lyn Hejinian calls the "open text" in her well-known essay, "The Rejection of Closure." According to Language writers, the reader must actively navigate linkages and associations among various elements of an open text, in contrast to the relatively straightforward activity of reading a "voice poem."

What kinds of poetry do Language writers invoke when they use the term "voice poem"? McCaffrey details three strands of predominant mid-to-late twentieth-century American poetic proclivities that Language writers oppose. First, he explains that the "voice poem" involves "the consecration of the individual voice (linguistically marked by the axis of the 'I' understood as a marker of self-plenitude, 'truth,' and 'sincerity') in the ego-chamber of the confessional lyric stance" which became entrenched in postwar American literature via the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Louise Glück, and Jorie Graham and "in a multiplicity of MFA programs and those poems that populate the pages of such venues as the *American Poetry Review* and *The New Yorker*" (146). Secondly, Language Writers opposed "the ego-cosmological syntax" of Robert Duncan "and the processual, physiological, and predominantly speech-based poetics grounded on organic models of the poem that ... culminate[d] in Olson's valorization of breath and syllable in his important 1950 pamphlet 'Projective Verse' and Denise Levertov's theorizing of the poem as organic form" (147). Finally, Language writers also disavow the "so-called poetry of accommodation," a term Jerome McGann has coined "to describe a prevailing poetry of social disaffection that failed to advance into an area of meaningful linguistic critique"

for, “[p]oems of emotionally charged disaffection ... ultimately resolve into a lyric attenuation that at its base seeks to clarify a single subject position” (147). As McCaffery amply describes, Language writers oppose the dominant articulations of lyric subjectivity within major strands of mid-to-late American twentieth century poetry, and thus, it is fair to consider Language writing, broadly, as *anti*-subjective.

Language writing critiques of the “voice poem” often target the lyric “I” as signifying a unitary, self-present subject and/or singular writer, and the “I” thus becomes a convenient linguistic marker for a host of associated assumptions about naturalized language and naïve ideas about subjectivity in a range of lyric poetries that stem from a Romantic, “expressive” lineage and may be identified as confessionalism, organicism, mysticism and/or political protest. Language writers view “expressive” poetry that centers on the self as fundamentally misguided, as Charles Bernstein explains in an interview: “‘It’s a mistake, I think to posit the self as the primary organizing feature of writing. As many others have pointed out, a poem exists in a matrix of social and historical relations that are more significant to the formation of an individual text than any personal qualities of the life or voice of an author’” (qtd. in Perloff *Dance of the Intellect* 220). Thus, “voice poems,” the Language writers argue, ultimately do the work of reifying the individualistic lyric “I” over against an essentially passive readership, and thus leave untouched the insidious ideologies of conventional language and authoritative discourses of late capitalism in American postmodernity. In the discourse which has been outlined here, the use of the first-person speaking subject, the “I” of the poetic text, with its concomitant invocation of the expressive self, has often been treated as a battleground. Critics and poets have tended to advocate relatively either straightforward use of the first-person singular or its total banishment.

The Lyric “I” in Contemporary Women’s Poetry

How did the Language critiques of the lyric “I” impact American women’s poetry in particular? In the criticism of contemporary women’s poetry, informed by the second-wave feminism of the 1970s and 1980s, the practice of using the lyric “I” has been an especially contested field. Disagreement has centered on whether or not women poets should use the first-person subject as a place of stability and coherence in order to represent women’s experiences and thereby advocate for—and provide a model of—women’s empowerment. Fundamental to these debates have been disagreements over models of subjectivity and power dynamics. On the one hand, critics including Susan Stanford Friedman and Nancy K. Miller warn of the dangers of poststructuralism to women and minority poets, who, unlike white male poets, come from a traditionally oppressed social group, and therefore should be wary of readily abandoning the notion of “subject” or “author.” On the other hand, avant-garde poet-critics such as Joan Retallack and Rae Armantrout argue that using the first-person singular subject is not empowering to readers of women’s poetry. Retallack and Armantrout argue that, rather than modeling a strong female subject or allowing for newer, feminist reading practices, poets such as Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds, in their use of the “I,” may be replicating the unitary, patriarchal subject that exerts dominance and oppressive authority over readers and/or persons they describe within the poetry. Finally, women (and men) poets who have employed the lyric subject have been accused of a lack of political or larger social engagement; the lyric in general, and the (post)confessional voice in particular, has often been associated with retreat or escape into the private and interior world of the self—ultimately, a form of solipsistic narcissism. Avant-garde women’s poetry that eschews the first-person subject, according to this logic,

facilitates a turn away from interiority and towards questions of larger social relevance and the role that language plays in perpetuating patriarchal ideologies.

However, while these feminist critical debates of the 1980s and 1990s were often framed in stark, polarizing terms, women's poetic practice was more complex. In 1982, experimental poet Kathleen Fraser wrote in the notes to Ron Silliman's *Ironwood* anthology that the Language writers' "esthetic distaste for self-referentiality and/or *evident* personal investment in one's subject immediately introduces a series of prohibiting factors. For a writer whose awareness has been tuned by a growing need to claim her own history and voice/s, such as feminism provides, Language Writing's concerns are often *experienced* (if not intended) as directives she cannot afford" (137). In her writings, Fraser recounts that she experienced a feeling of "double marginality," for if Language writing's banishment of the subject was too prohibitive, neither did she seek to fulfill the prescriptions of second-wave feminist poetics, which insisted on self-expression of feelings and direct representation of women's experiences (qtd. in Keller 3-4). Consequently, Fraser founded the innovative women's poetry journal *HOW(ever)*, which ran in print from 1983 to 1992 and traced a lineage between experimental women modernist poets and contemporary, innovative women writers (Keller 4). Furthermore, as Linda Kinnahan observes, by at least the early 1990s, a number of feminist critics and experimental women poets "wrestled with Language Poetry's 'given' of subject banishment," for they found it to be "a closed model for reading a range of works positioning themselves differently in relation to the masculine, white, and Western model of subjectivity" (12). According to such feminist writers, including Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Caroline Bergvall, Romana Huk, and Clair Wills, the litmus test for innovative poetry should not be the presence or absence of the lyric subject. Innovative women's poetry can deploy the lyric "I" in myriad ways that do not replicate the patriarchal "ideological I"

but instead explore a range of possibilities for subjectivity within poetic texts. Indeed, this dissertation builds from the starting point of feminist experimental women's poetry and feminist criticism that acknowledges the value of the Language writing's critique of the "voice poem" but who resist a simple rejection of the lyric "I" or the dismissal of any exploration of subjectivity. Accordingly, although my project concentrates largely on work produced in the late 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century, it can be helpful to look at *My Life*, a significant Language text written in the 1980s by Lyn Hejinian, who is considered one of the founders of the Language movement. An exploration of the critical discourse surrounding *My Life* and Hejinian's poetics can elucidate the critical position concerning women's experimental poetry and subjectivity upon which my current project builds.

Subjectivity in Language Writing: Lyn Hejinian's My Life

My Life is a significant text of postmodern experimental poetry for several reasons, including its popularity. As critics Craig Dworkin and Lisa Samuels have noted, by the mid-1990s, *My Life* could be considered the most popular contemporary experimental book of poetry.²¹ Furthermore, the critical conversation surrounding *My Life*, which so often focuses on poetic subjectivity, illuminates both the stakes and the possibilities for Hejinian's poetic contemporaries and successors, including postlanguage women poets who write innovative poetry that retains and revisits the poetic "I."

My Life, first published in 1980 and expanded in a new edition in 1987, is a text that confounds generic classifications; critics and readers alternately consider it a postmodern autobiography, a short novelette, or a work of experimental prose poetry. As Lisa Samuels

²¹ See Dworkin, "Penelope Reworking the Twill" and Samuels, "Eight Justifications." By 1996, *My Life* had sold around 8,000 copies and had reached its 6th printing; while this may not seem like a high figure, it far exceeds the sales of other non-"mainstream" poetry books, and it has been taught frequently at the college and high school levels (Samuels 103).

observes, it can be considered an exemplary model of postmodern procedural verse, in which a predetermined conceit dictates its form (107-8). In the 1980 version, when Hejinian was 37 years old, *My Life* contained thirty-seven sections for each year of the writer's life, with thirty-seven sentences each. In the 1987 version of *My Life*, these sections were expanded to correspond with the poet's current age of 45, so each of the previous sections had eight additional sentences included in various points of each text's section, and eight additional sections of 45 lines each were added.²² This conceit, and the book's title, set up conventional expectations of autobiographical writing, such as highly personal content and a linear narrative that culminates to the present time, with the writer reflecting on the past. However, the text of *My Life* plays with these expectations, for each section presents a series of sentences that are juxtaposed in what Michael Davidson calls a "nondiscursive, nonsyllogistic fashion," (212) as is evident in the oft-cited opening, which begins with an italicized phrase in the upper left corner, "*A pause, a rose / something on paper*" and then continues:

A moment yellow, just as four years later, when my father returned home from the war, the moment of greeting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs, younger, thinner than when he left, was purple—though moments are no longer so colored. Somewhere, in the background, rooms share a pattern of small roses. Pretty is as pretty does. In certain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of pre-necessity. The better things were gathered in a pen. The windows were narrowed by white gauze curtains which were never loosened. Here I refer to irrelevance, that rigidity which never intrudes. Hence, repetitions, free from all ambition. The shadow of the redwood trees, she said, was oppressive. (7)

²² All citations are from the 1987 edition of *My Life*.

On one level, the text is rather accessible: the syntax within each sentence is relatively intact and the diction is straightforward. However, with the text's deployment of parataxis, the links between the sentences are unclear, and so the reader is faced with disjunctive juxtapositions rather than a stable narrative or clear character development. Moreover, as the text continues, many phrases are repeated as leitmotifs, including "A pause, a rose, something on paper" and the gender-laden cliché "Pretty is as pretty does." However, such repetitions—which are described in this opening section as "free from all ambition"—are always juxtaposed among different surrounding sentences and therefore within a variety of contexts; connections among various descriptive elements are thus never fixed. The overall effect is to distance the descriptions from the personal life of a singular author, and instead a discourse emerges through the interplay of repetition and differences in language.

Several critics in the dozen or so years after the appearance of *My Life* read Hejinian's deployment of these experimental formal elements as a representative Language school text; these critics include Marjorie Perloff, Michael Davidson—who asserts that *My Life* is an exemplary illustration of Language writer Ron Silliman's "new sentence" (212)—and David Jarraway, who goes so far as to title a 1992 essay "'My Life' through the Eighties: The Exemplary L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E of Lyn Hejinian." Davidson and Jarraway also read *My Life* in the grain of Hejinian's essay, "The Rejection of Closure," with its advocacy for an "open text" that resists the author-centric (often "I"-centric), domineering nature of the "closed text" by encouraging readerly participation. In these readings, the concept of "open text" is applied to *My Life*, which thus indicates that readers must actively participate as textual creators by filling in gaps or links that the text does not complete.

Another strain of criticism of *My Life* emphasizes the role of gender in the text. In an early reading, Perloff observes that, while the text may be “anybody’s autobiography,” ultimately, the speaking subject is definitively female, for “*My Life* conveys what the archetypal life of a young American girl is like” (*Dance of the Intellect* 225). In a highly theoretical approach, Laura Hinton draws on psychoanalytic theory of fetishism and fetishistic nostalgia, to read *My Life* as a postmodern romance (and also an anti-romance) that explores the postmodern female subject by exploring its representational crisis in language and visual imagery. Meanwhile, Hilary Clark and Juliana Spahr read *My Life* as a key text for women’s autobiography. Clark argues that it presents a “feminist critique” of paternal authority as “manifested and perpetuated in language” and traditional structures of autobiography (328). In contrast, Spahr applies Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity to argue that *My Life* presents a way out of the discourse of women’s multiple but fixed subjectivities (such as found in the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa and Maxine Hong Kingston) by presenting a continually “resignified,” fluctuating subject that emerges through the reading process. Furthermore, Spahr applies Hejinian’s “Rejection of Closure” to argue that agency is effectively transferred to the reader in *My Life*.²³

As these descriptions of the gender-based criticism of *My Life* demonstrate, much of the discussion of Hejinian’s writing focuses on issues of subjectivity. Given the text’s focused exploration of subjectivity, does this, then, mark a departure from other Language school writings? Critics differ in their assessment of this question when considering Hejinian’s poetry and poetics. Michael Greer takes up Hejinian’s influential essay, “The Rejection of Closure,” to contrast it with Ron Silliman’s essay on poetics, “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the

²³ Another analysis that foregrounds gender is by Craig Dworkin. Dworkin also reads *My Life* in the grain of Hejinian’s essay “Rejection of Closure” and likens the text to another art form, the nineteenth-century patchwork quilt, which is associated with feminine creativity (“Penelope Reworking the Twill”).

World.” Greer treats these essays as illustrations of the two major strains in Language poetry: Silliman, who engages with Marxist theory, represents a turn outwards to the historicity of literary forms in an effort to participate in class resistance, while Hejinian deploys the poststructuralism of Barthes and French feminists, including Irigaray, Cixous, and Kristeva, to turn “inward” in her consideration of discursive subjectivity (345). Greer further asserts that “Rejection of Closure” includes moments of humanism in its exploration of the subject, a quality he praises. However, not all critics examining Language school are interested in both of the strains that Greer identifies. For example, in his book-length synoptic treatment of the movement, George Hartley acknowledges that no single political position applies to everyone labeled a “Language poet,” but he focuses on those poets who make specifically Marxist claims—and all of these poets turn out to be men.²⁴ The majority of poets who have been identified as Language writers are men, so Hartley’s focus on male poets is understandable. But his criticism illustrates the ongoing identification of certain men poets as aligned with the Language movement’s core agenda, which involves the outright rejection of “I”-centric writing and banishment of subjectivity. The characterization of Language writing as anti-subjective, as also evident in McCaffrey’s retrospective essay, thus stands in contrast with Greer’s proposal of two strains of Language poetry.

If Language poetry is defined as purely anti-subjective, then Hejinian’s *My Life* may not be an exemplary text of Language poetry after all; however, depending on one’s point of view, that may not be such a bad thing. For example, Samuels argues that one of the strengths of *My Life* is its “subjectively motivated proceduralism” that includes an “I” that is flexible, unstable, and “inhabitable” by the reader (113). Samuels reads the “I” of *My Life* as unconventionally open

²⁴ The Language poets Hartley focuses on are Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, Charles Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, and Steve McCaffery (xv).

but nevertheless deviating from the Language poetry's central agenda: "This inhabitable I, by the way, is unlike the concern with obviating the 'I' that many see as a critical project of Language poetry. If word focus and phrasal repetition make *My Life* a Language text, its I-centeredness does not. ... Though [a] focus on the human is not what Hejinian usually preaches in her essays on writing, it is what her writing usually enacts" (113). Thus, unlike many other critics, Samuels reads *My Life* against the grain of the poetics Hejinian articulates in her own poetics—that is, as much more subject-oriented and (as Greer argues) humanist than Hejinian may intend. While I am content for *My Life* to remain classified as Language poetry, Samuels' articulation of the text's *exploration* of subjectivity, rather than its *anti*-subjectivity, is a key insight.

Like Samuels, Clair Wills also reads *My Life* somewhat against the grain of Hejinian's poetics. In an essay that serves as an important precursor for my own argument, Wills also observes more of an "I-centeredness" than many other critics.²⁵ Wills argues that it is erroneous to read *My Life* as evincing an absence of subjectivity, which contrasts with Hejinian's own stated disavowal of the subject as a "person" and the work of art as an expression of an inner self that is unique and autonomous. Wills asserts that, while *My Life* questions the coherence of any poetic "voice" and denies any consistent speaking "I," there is introspection and interiority, but without straightforward "self-expression" or "representation." Instead, *My Life* reveals an attention to the ways in which the female self negotiates a place within the discourses that construct her. Interiority is not absent, but it is articulated by language, which, as indicated by clichés and reified fragments of discourse, is both impersonal and personal: "by identifying with certain objects or bits of language, these become constitutive elements in their expression of themselves ... through a process of appropriation 'become' the writer ... seemingly arbitrary or

²⁵ Unlike Samuels, however, Wills' argument is not concerned with whether or not *My Life* is an exemplary text of the Language movement or if it in fact departs from the Language movement's central agenda.

contingent words and phrases gain and retain their significance because of their associative contexts within the life. They are what make the life ‘mine’” (Wills 44).

In her argument, Wills is interested in a critical movement beyond the “two camps” model of women’s poetry in particular, which she places within the gendered context of the ongoing transformation of public and private spheres throughout the twentieth century. While Wills acknowledges that “there isn’t a pristine sphere of the lyric self which is not politicised and constructed,” she distinguishes herself from Perloff, whom she sees as too fully embracing the perspective of French postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard, who argues that the self is emptied completely by mass media and electronic technology. Instead, Wills asserts, many experimental women poets do not insist on the *absence* of self and/or interiority, for they instead explore

the ways in which the relationship between the public world of the mass media and the experience of being an individual is mediated. ... Much of this poetry reveals not the absence of privacy but the ways in which that private or intimate realm of experience is constructed ‘through’ the public, and therefore elements of ‘expressivity,’ though radically divorced from notions of authenticity, are present.
(40-41)

Wills ultimately argues that poetry that demonstrates “new forms of interiority, which are more reflexive and more negotiated, remain possible, and with them—presumably—the traces of a transformed, opened-out, but still recognisable lyric self” (39).

Wills’ investigation provides a key model for my own project. In the light of Wills’ reading, Hejinian’s explorations of subjectivity in *My Life* may be read as a text that illustrates how women’s experimental poetry can acknowledge the fallacies of the mainstream “voice” poem and its assumptions of authenticity, stability, and straightforward representation, while

retaining a version of lyric subjectivity that signals an awareness that the lyric “I” is always mediated through language. Therefore, innovative texts, like the ones I will examine in this project, need not be *anti*-subjective, for they explore how one’s (private) interiority is not nonexistent but constructed through (public) discourses. By using Wills’ reading of *My Life* as a foundation, one can see how the seeds of postlanguage lyric poetic explorations of subjectivity were sown within the very movement that is often defined in opposition to the subjective as such.

After Language: Lyric in the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

The influence that Language writers have had on both their contemporaries and their successors has been considerable. Poetry critic Jed Rasula observes that “[t]he legacy of language poetry has been disseminated into the environment of poetic innovation at large” by the turn of the twenty-first century (*Syncopations* 18). In particular, Rasula notes that “[m]ost pertinent among the effects of Language poetry is its erosion of the complacent security on which the lyrical ego hoists its banner. The lyrical ego is by no means deposed as such but the diversification of poetic means and strategies open up sites of ‘agency’ which do not require validation by an heroic ego, and do not serve as vigilant fortifications of identity” (“Ten Different Fruits” 28). Much of the Language critiques that concern the “lyrical ego” might understandably be read as a rejection of lyric poetry. However, this is not the whole story, as Daniel Barbiero argues: “[w]hile a certain type of lyric does seem to have been rejected, it is also true that Language writing’s critical program served to produce an alternative, more self-conscious understanding of lyric. Rather than being simply rejected in full, lyric conventions were subjected to a critical scrutiny that chose to emphasize the role of artifice in the production of lyric effect” (355). As such, Rasula observes that, emerging from the “two-camp” discourse,

the overall Language school critique “seems to have nourished poetic practice in markedly nondenominational ways” (*Syncopations* 24). Contemporaneous with, and after, the heyday of Language writing, many poets writing in the 1980s, 1990s and early twenty-first century have sought to compose poetry that incorporates both lyric and innovative techniques, thus carving out what has sometimes been considered a “third way” or a “third space” (Keller 6).

With references to the work of Linda Kinnahan, Kathleen Fraser, and Clair Wills, I have noted how several women poets and feminist critics through the 1980s and 1990s have explored poetry that both acknowledged the Language writers’ critiques of the conventional lyric “I” while providing nuanced explorations of subjectivity in works of poetry and/or literary criticism. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that in the twenty-first century discourse surrounding “third way” poetry women poets have played a key role, first with the “Where Lyric Meets Language” conference that was organized by Claudia Rankine and held at Barnard College in April 1999, and then in the 2002 anthology *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, edited by Rankine and Juliana Spahr (Spahr “Introduction” 1). In the introduction to *American Women Poets*, Spahr argues that the innovative poetry of the women writers represented in the collection “makes room within lyric for language writing’s more politicized claims” (2). Spahr describes innovative lyric poetry as incorporating “modernist techniques such as fragmentation, parataxis, run-ons, interruption, and disjunction” while simultaneously avoiding the conventions of “linear narrative development, of meditative confessionality, and of singular voice” (2). Poetry critic Lynn Keller also notes the prominence of women’s innovative poetry in *Thinking Poetry: Readings in Women’s Exploratory Poetics*, a critical work on what she describes as the “exploratory” poetry of several women writers of the 1990s and early twenty-first century. Keller notes that, around the turn of the twenty-first century in the U.S.,

“many of the most visible and compelling experimentally inclined/exploratory poets writing today are women” (9). Keller describes her aim as joining “existing efforts to foster recognition that Language poetry is not the only form of contemporary poetic linguistic experimentation and that female poets are playing a key role in expanding the possibilities for alternative poetic practices” (2). While Fraser and Kinnahan’s aforementioned descriptions of the double marginalization of experimental women poets by the prescriptions of Language poetry and second-wave feminist poetics provide one key context for the prominent role women poets have played in producing innovative poetry, Spahr and Keller also trace possible reasons for the surge of innovative poetry by women in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. Spahr mentions the long and vexed history that women have had with lyric poetry, particularly the patriarchal tradition of the Petrarchan love sonnet, and points to criticism that foregrounds women poets’ reclamation of the lyric through different historical eras across centuries in the West (“Introduction” 2). Keller speculates that one reason may be because “gender may be a significant circumstance affecting one’s perception of the utility of common language,” and therefore women, who have historically been outside dominant power structures, are keenly attuned to subverting that “common language” through linguistic experimentation (9). Keller also cites the claims of influential poets and critics who point to the increased sociopolitical power of women and expansion of feminist viewpoints in late twentieth century U.S. to explain why so many women poets have been writing innovative poetry that is not constrained by second-wave feminist prescriptions for gender empowerment (9-10).²⁶ While it may be difficult

²⁶ Keller cites DuPlessis’s argument that women write disruptive poetry to reject oppressive social structures encoded in linguistic and literary conventions; Retallack’s point that “only recently have women ‘finally’ grown ‘powerful enough sociopolitically to undertake the risks of this feminine challenge in their own texts’”; Armantrout’s case that “experimentalism and feminism are ‘natural allies’” because women as outsiders can interrogate constructed identities and conventions such as the “unified Voice” and, as such, “the expanded field of feminist experimentalism simply reflects the permeation of feminist perspectives through literary America”; and Rasula’s claim that, “in the aftermath of the second wave of feminism with its prescriptive sense of what the poem

to pinpoint the exact causes of the emergence of so many innovative women postlanguage poets, suffice it to say that they are many in number, and their work is rich and varied.

A number of poets and critics—women and men, feminist and otherwise—have theorized the emergence of turn of the twenty-first century poetry that deliberately explores a space between or apart from the “two camps” model and its delimited, dual offerings of either representation or disappearance of lyric subjectivity. For example, in a 1998 review of Susan Wheeler’s collection *Smokes* for the *Boston Review*, Stephen Burt identifies what he terms a “school” that he calls “Ellipticism”: “Elliptical poets try to manifest a person—who speaks the poem and reflects the poet—while using all the verbal gizmos developed over the last few decades to undermine the coherence of speaking selves. They are post-avant-gardist, or post-‘postmodern’: they have read (most of them) Stein’s heirs, and the ‘language writers,’ and have chosen to do otherwise.”²⁷ Furthermore, in the critical anthology *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s* (2002), edited by Mark Wallace and Steven Marks, two significant essays appear that address emerging trends in contemporary poetry. In “The Arena in the Garden: Some Thoughts on the Late Lyric,” poet-critic Elizabeth Willis argues against the term “post-language poetry” because it suggests “that a literary movement is something one gets over and that succeeding manifestations within the same genre spring forward from it while negating their chronological or stylistic predecessors” (225). Instead, Willis offers the term “late lyric,” which she describes as “lyric practice whereby the overall structure and strategy of the lyric is overlaid or mixed with other influences, forms, and rhetorical sampling” (228). This lyric does not aim “to unify or commodify or even represent human experience but to stress language

should be and do, women are less invested in specific forms of gender empowerment ... even while they remain wary of the conventions entangled with social structures that so long excluded or oppressed them” (9-10).

²⁷ Burt identifies as “Elliptical books” several collections that appeared in the 1990s, including Susan Wheeler’s *Smokes*, Lucie Brock-Broido’s *The Master Letters*, Mark Ford’s *Landlocked* and Mark Levine’s *Debt*.

in such a way as to evoke an alternate experience for its readers, not an objective correlative to a universal experience but an engagement in the process of finding out” (229). Willis invokes lyric as embracing the process of wandering and bewilderment, rather than resting in cognitive or experiential stability (231). In terms of lyric subjectivity, Willis treads a fine line between the poet’s subjective presence and her absence, interiority and exteriority, arguing that “[a]nywhere from Aristotle to Dickinson to Lorca to Spicer it has been acknowledged that the lyric poem comes not strictly from within but from elsewhere; it is not *self*-expressive except to the extent that ideas of self or voice are never entirely absent from the tonal shadings of language” (228). Moreover, in his essay, Mark Wallace delineates what he sees as five major strains of contemporary poetry and goes on to advocate what he calls a “free multiplicity of form,” whereby “a wide variety of forms can be used by any writer and can exist side by side with other forms” without those forms being controlled by divisive rhetoric (197). In a “free multiplicity of form,” “issues of poetic form are not repressed and controlled by poetry production networks competing for ownership of forms” and “use of a form would no longer be considered necessarily an attack, or even a critique, of other possible forms” (196, 197). Thus, Willis and Wallace advance critical attempts to disrupt boundaries and rigid ideological boundaries that Language writings and avant-garde poetry critics tend to draw in their rhetoric. Furthermore, for my project, Daniel Barbiero presents a key argument that addresses the emerging trends of contemporary poetry. In an essay published in a 2001/2002 issue of *Talisman*, he argues that lyric should be considered not as a genre but as a mode that involves the ““representation of an act of self-expression”” rather than “a properly expressive utterance” (356). Barbiero calls for a new understanding of “post-Language lyric,” which is produced by poets who largely accept Language writers’ critiques of “traditional” lyric’s assumptions of “ordinary language

conventions” like authenticity and transparency (366). However, unlike Language writing, “post-Language lyric” does not foreground artifice, for it has instead “has incorporated lyric elements into a larger context” and thus “has extended the boundaries of the self-consciously non-expressive lyric” (366). Of particular relevance to “post-Language” poets are issues of lyric interiority and lyric subjectivity, and, as I mention in the introduction, Barbiero argues that the new lyric can be described as “predominantly circumspective in nature, rather than—as in traditional lyric—introspective” (363). Barbiero’s description of “post-Language” lyric as “circumspective” and interiority as “porous” as it is constituted by exterior forces and discourses, thus echoes key elements of Wills’ interpretation of *My Life*, and his articulation is similarly significant for my project.

In my understanding of postlanguage lyric poetry, I argue that the poets I survey do as Barbiero describes, for they preserve lyric features while taking into account Language writing’s critique of simplistic lyric subjectivity, thus seeking to construct a lyric that is “circumspective.” Accordingly, I accept Barbiero’s definition of lyric as “the linguistic presentation of a speaker’s state of mind,” a mode that “pivots on the indication, whether directly or indirectly, of the (broadly speaking) subjective or phenomenal states of the poem’s speaker” (356). This definition’s emphasis on “linguistic presentation” rejects the idea of direct self-expression of thought and therefore highlights the rhetorical and performative elements of lyric poetry. At the same time, subjectivity is still granted a central role in this definition of lyric poetry. In other words, the postlanguage lyric subject’s views matter, but with the understanding that we are “situated within the center of the circumstances surrounding us. But it is understood that such a center is not something we create, but rather is a kind of point of insertion into the given” (356). Barbiero’s definition of postlanguage lyric at the turn of the twenty-first century applies to the

work of Rankine, Howe and Robinson, for their work indeed indicates the “subjective or phenomenal states of the poem’s speaker” that is “situated within the center of the circumstances surrounding us.”²⁸

Contemporary American Poetry and the Discourse of Hybridity

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the concept of “third way” contemporary poetry has grown in momentum. Many critics have theorized the emerging subgenre, particularly in the introductions of a number of poetry anthologies that have appeared since *American Women Poets in the 21st Century*. Like their predecessor, these anthologies address the emergence of poetic texts where “lyric meets language,” but they often include poetry written by women and men. These volumes include follow-up anthologies edited by Rankine and Lisa Sewell, *American Poets in the Twenty-First Century: The New Poetics* (2007) and *Eleven More American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Poetics Across North America* (2012); Reginald Shepherd’s *Lyric Postmodernisms: An Anthology of Contemporary Innovative Poetries* (2008); Cole Swensen’s and David St. John’s *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry* (2009); and Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray’s *The New American Poetry of Engagement: A 21st Century Anthology* (2012). The introductions to these anthologies emphasize how, in Lisa Sewell’s words, “innovative, materialist poetic practices” such as “interruption, parataxis, narrative discontinuity, and alinearity to produce fragmentation and disjunction” now appear in

²⁸ Barbiero’s definition of postlanguage lyric at the turn of the twenty-first century appears within a discourse over the expansion of an understanding of what counts as poetry and what counts of lyric. The question of whether the critical discourse surrounding the avant-garde involves an expansion or repudiation of the lyric is unresolved. While the major critical champions of contemporary avant-garde poetry, Marjorie Perloff and Charles Altieri, have been understood as being among “the forefront of the expansion of the poetic canon to include more experimental writing in the 1980s” and for having “both helped turn American poetry criticism away from a reduction of the poetry to the lyrical,” (Nealon, “The Matter of Capital” 488), their work has also been read by Jackson and Prins as having “sustained an expanded sense of the lyric in their new critical poetics” (456). While Nealon reads Perloff and Altieri as “anti-lyric,” Jackson and Prins reads their critiques aimed at not the lyric as such, but at critical models that adopt ahistorical definitions of the lyric (often based in ideas about Romantic lyric poetry) and ahistorical models reading the lyric (such as those espoused by New Criticism, and often assumed by later critics).

the poetry of writers across groups, including “the lyric mainstream and multicultural poetics of identity politics” (3). Furthermore, all of these introductions indicate that such poetry has absorbed the Language school critique of the stable speaking subject or lyric ego, while nevertheless seeking to explore lyric subjectivity. Shepherd frames the poetry in *Lyric Postmodernisms* as “lyric investigations” that “combine lyricism and avant-garde experimentation in a new synthesis” (xi). In their anthology, Swensen and St. John offer the much-discussed concept of “hybrid” poetry. According to Swensen’s introduction to *American Hybrid*, “[h]ybrid poems honor the avant-garde mandate to renew the forms and expand the boundaries of poetry—thereby increasing the expressive potential of language itself—while also remaining committed to the emotional spectra of lived experience” and remaining “audible and comprehensible to the population at large” (xxi). Hybrid poems straddle the categories of the avant-garde and the lyric by accessing “a wealth of tools” which is associated with both the “conventional” poetry and “experimental” work (xxi).²⁹

Swensen and St. John’s model of “hybridity” of has perhaps been the most influential—for example, Keniston and Gray adopt it as the paradigm for their anthology—and the most critiqued. Critic Hank Lazer argues that the “tale of happy hybridity” and tolerance is a kind of dilettantism that promotes poetry which evades any real commitment or risk (165). To Lazer, the discourse of hybrid poetry obscures both a lingering animosity against Language writing and an overall climate of persistent anti-intellectualism (165-66).³⁰ While Lazer remains committed to

²⁹ In their selection of poets, Swensen and St. John include all three of the poets I investigate in this dissertation.

³⁰ Lazer is not the only proponent of avant-garde writing who remains invested in an ongoing division between experimental and conventional poetics. In his introduction to the 2011 anthology of conceptual poetry that he co-edited with Kenneth Goldsmith, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Craig Dworkin defines their project as intrinsically opposed to the lyric subject, for its writings aim to “explore the potential of writing that tries to be ‘rid of lyrical interference of the individual as ego’ (as Charles Olson famously put it). Our emphasis is on work that does not seek to express unique, coherent, or consistent individual psychologies and that, moreover, refuses familiar strategies of authorial control in favor of automatism, reticence, obliquity, and modes of noninterference” (“The Fate of Echo” xliii).

the recognition of what he sees as ongoing and unresolved divisions in an essentially polarized field, other critics who seek alternative understandings of the “two-camp” discourse nevertheless disagree with the hybridity model. Keller sees the rhetoric surrounding the “third way” as a “problematically tidy model” of Hegelian thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, arguing that her concept of “exploratory” poetry seeks to capture more of the nuances of poetic development in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.³¹ Similarly, in his contribution to the essay “Hybrid Aesthetics and its Discontents,” which is based on a conference panel delivered at the 2010 Association of Writers and Writing Programs Conference, Mark Wallace also reads “hybridity” and other “third way poetics” as recalling a Hegelian synthesis that diminishes difference in order to forge a middle ground through the construction of a new, non-competing unity (125). Meanwhile, other critics have questioned whether the two-camp model has been truly left behind. Megan Volpert argues that Swensen’s hybridity is “just the rose of the avant-garde by another name” (145), and Oren Izenberg similarly asserts that the hybridity model constitutes “an argument for the ascendancy of the avant-garde tradition under a different name” (191n23). Moreover, Izenberg echoes Lazer with the objection that “to treat some poetic possibilities as moves or gestures free for redeployment and resignification is to sever them from their most fundamental commitments” (191n23). Reena Sastri, on the other hand, worries that the new hybridity model reclaims values of experiment for lyric; she argues that surface clarity and, therefore, reader accessibility suffers (191). Finally, in contrast to critics who claim that hybridity essentially re-names experimental poetry and heralds the “ascendancy of the avant-garde tradition,” Jennifer Ashton argues that the current notion of the eroding opposition

³¹ Although Keller directs this criticism to Shepherd’s specific articulation of a “new synthesis,” she clearly means to include the “hybridity” model in her critique as well. There is a key difference between “third way” poetics as espoused by Shepherd and Swensen/St. John and Keller’s model of “exploratory” poetics: Keller remains committed to *expanding* the category of “experimental” poems rather than positing a third space or bridge between mainstream and innovative poetics.

between the avant-garde (anti-lyric) and the mainstream (lyric) poetry indicates that, “in a certain sense, the lyric has won” (216). Ashton cites the introductions to the anthologies by Rankine and Spahr and Swensen and St. John in order to argue that their “commitments to interiority and intimate speech are nothing if not committed to highly particularized subject positions” and to the emotional experiences of individuals (218). Ashton attacks what she sees as the ongoing legacy of twentieth century American poetry’s concentration on the subject and considers “individual and experiential effects” to be “irrelevant, immaterial” because the “world’s formal structure” cannot “be altered by our responses to it or by its effects on us—by, say, our feeling ‘complete’ ... [it] can only be altered by a change to [its] form” (227-28).³² While “the world’s formal structure” is undoubtedly fundamental in shaping political and material realities, Ashton’s outright dismissal of individual experiences, whether emotional, spiritual, or cognitive, arrives at a rather grim and dehumanizing conclusion.

The critiques of hybridity or other “third way” models of contemporary poetry, taken together, raises the questions such as, which is ascendant, lyric poetry or avant-garde poetry? And are these essentially avant-garde poems with lyric features, or lyric poems with avant-garde features? I suggest that such critiques largely further the false binary between the avant-garde and the lyric. Furthermore, while I appreciate concerns about what values or nuances may be *lost* in the critical concept of hybridity, I am largely sympathetic to the various models of “third way” poetry, for I would like to emphasize what may be *gained* in postlanguage lyric poetry that draws from various lyric and experimental lineages. Moreover, my classification of Rankine, Howe,

³² Ashton provocatively argues that the entire trajectory of postwar American poetry is fixated on subjectivity. Citing Hejninian’s poetics, Ashton subsumes the “anti-lyric” Language school, with its advocacy of the “open text,” as also primarily concerned with the subject, for Language writers merely transfer an emphasis on the writing subject to the reading subject. Furthermore, she argues that the conceptual poetry composed advanced by Dworkin, Goldsmith, and others highlight the subjective presences doing the shaping and editing behind their transcriptive and citational practices. While these particular critiques are thought-provoking, Ashton’s conclusion that the lyric and the anti-lyric constitute two sides of the same coin problematically elides significant differences of the approaches towards subjectivity among a great variety of American avant-garde and conventional poetic traditions.

and Robinson as “postlanguage lyric” poets stems partly from how extensively these writers seek to claim the lyric in their writing projects. It is true that, at certain points of their writings on poetics (in both poetic texts and in essays), Rankine, Howe, and Robinson emphasize their differences from mainstream or postconfessional poetry, and their writings indicate a keen awareness of Language writing’s critiques. At the same time, they all signal their embrace of lyric poetry: Howe named her 2007 collection *The Lyrics: Poems*; Rankine gave the same subtitle, *An American Lyric*, to both *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), and *Citizen* (2014); and Robinson has spoken of what she calls her strong and unfashionable affiliation with lyric poetry (Rosenthal 250). For these reasons, I find Barbiero’s classification of “post-Language lyric” to be the most fitting formulation for the poets I consider in this study, for this name gestures to both the elements of Language writing and lyric poetry that all three poets draw on. As Willis observes, this is an imperfect label, for it indicates a chronological succession when there is not necessarily any; in fact, Fanny Howe is of the same generation as the Language writers. Nevertheless, “postlanguage lyric” is more descriptive of the literary historical landscape than Willis’s proposed term, “late lyric,” indicates. Further, the use of the term “postlanguage” has circulated more extensively. “Postlanguage lyric” is the designation that Paul Hoover uses in the second edition of the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry*, where he claims that Howe and Robinson are among poets whose work in “postlanguage lyric” illustrates “the natural inclination of poetry toward sweetness and depth of expression; moreover, subjectivity, while often tempered with irony, is granted a role” (xlvii).³³ I suggest that Rankine fits the description

³³ Critic Christopher Nealon uses the term “post-Language poet” to describe American and Canadian poets in the generation after Language poets, including Joshua Clover, Kevin Davies, Lisa Robertson, and Rod Smith. Nealon emphasizes these poets’ inheritance of Language writing that emphasizes Marxist theory and the Frankfurt School in particular; he argues that they strike a “camp posture” toward the “damage” of late-late capitalism, thus reinterpreting Adorno and Benjamin’s messianism (“Camp Messianism” 579). Thus, Nealon’s use of the term “post-Language poet” differs from Barbiero and Hoover’s emphasis on “post-Language lyric” poetry’s lyricism and the role of the subject.

of “postlanguage lyric” poet as well; indeed, she has played a major role—as writer, editor, and conference organizer—in identifying and participating in the emerging contemporary poetry as a site “Where Lyric Meets Language,” as the significant 1999 conference title suggests.

As the label “postlanguage lyric” indicates, poets such as Rankine, Howe, and Robinson engage in the kinds of hybridizing strategies Swensen articulates, for they borrow from, and honor, differing poetic lineages and techniques. In contrast to Lazer and Izenberg’s assertions that contemporary poetry that draws on both avant-garde and lyric traditions lacks commitment to those respective traditions’ values, I maintain that it is possible for a poet to embrace values that are associated with a range of poetic predecessors. As the subsequent chapters of this project will illustrate, the poetry of Rankine, Howe, and Robinson deploy innovative poetic gestures and techniques from lyric and avant-garde traditions while remaining highly aware of various types of poetry’s “fundamental commitments.” Indeed, I argue, these three postlanguage poets are centrally engaged in using poetic forms to convey the commitment to construct postlanguage lyric poetry that articulates lyric subjectivities *ethically*.

The Ethics of Levinas and Derrida

Since the conventional lyric subject has been so extensively associated with the problematic dimensions of the “ideological I,” the ethics of postlanguage lyric poetry must involve the critique of Western, post-Enlightenment subjectivity. As I note in the introduction, the writings of Levinas have come to serve as the basis for the leading theoretical methodology of literary-ethical inquiry that has emerged in the turn of the twenty-first century. I also noted that Sewell has invoked Levinas’s concept of alterity to describe representations “unassimilable difference” in contemporary women’s poetry (*Eleven More Women Poets* 2). In this project, I build on Sewell’s observation by using the ethics of Levinas and Derrida as the major theoretical

framework for my readings of contemporary poetic texts. The following summary is intended to elucidate key concepts and definitions that I employ in the subsequent chapters.

Levinasian thought advances a critique of Western metaphysics, particularly the emphasis on ontology, or being in-itself, which, Levinas argues, perpetuates a self-centered subjectivity. As theologian Alain Mayama observes, Levinas particularly critiques the turn toward the subject that emerged in the Enlightenment era through the concept of Rene Descartes' disembodied and autonomous *cogito*, and Immanuel Kant's continued identification of a self-sufficient subject as the center of epistemological inquiry who, consequently, justifies egocentric moral and political thought and behavior (45). Levinas asserts that "ethics as a first philosophy" places the subject's obligation to the other as prior to ontology. Levinas rejects a self-centered subjectivity and redefines subjectivity as "being-in-the-world" for the Other (Mayama 95).

It is important to note that the "Other" is a term from Continental philosophy that, in considerations of intersubjectivity, is described as both the counterpart to the "self" and a figure of radical alterity. The term the "Other," however, has been taken up in very different ways by alternate theoretical approaches. In influential strands of contemporary literary criticism, including feminist and postcolonial theories as initially articulated by Simone de Beauvoir and Edward Said, respectively, the "Other" has come to signify difference in terms of social power dynamics, where the individuals who are "othered" have been denigrated as different, weaker, and marginalized. Therefore, members of dominant groups, guided by patriarchal, racist, and/or imperialist ideologies, consider these "Others" to be justifiably oppressed. In contrast, for Levinas, the Other is prior to and superior to the subject; the subject approaches the Other almost as an object of worship. In Levinas's ethics, the face of the Other, both in flesh and in language, interrupts the subject's autonomy and demands a response (*Totality* 82-84): "the first fact of

existence is neither being in-itself (*en soi*) nor being for-itself (*pour soi*) but being *for the other* (*pour l'autre*); in other words . . . human existence is a creature” (“Transcendence of Words” 149). Levinas also defines subjectivity as “welcoming the Other, as hospitality” (*Totality* 27). Hospitality or welcome involves the recognition of the Other’s radical alterity, that is, the irreducibility of the Other to thought or classification because the encounter with the Other involves a relation with infinity (*Totality* 48-50). Accordingly, the type of *ethical* encounter Levinas describes is not an occurrence where the subject intends to shape the Other through thought or action, but rather involves the subject’s openness toward the alterity of the Other. In his articulation of encounter with the face of the Other, Levinas advances a peaceful model of intersubjective relations, in distinction from, for example, Hegel’s master-slave model, in which relation intrinsically involves a bid for domination.

Levinas engaged with Derrida in an ongoing dialogue over the decades, and much of Derrida’s ethics build upon Levinasian thought. Derrida advances Levinasian ideas through his articulation of the gift and hospitality. With these concepts, the subject aims, in Levinasian fashion, to prioritize the Other as recipient or guest in radical terms. In contrast to the conventional ideas of giving and hosting, in which the giver or host circumscribes the conditions of offer and may expect reciprocity or exchange, Derrida links gift to excess (rather than limited offering) and hospitality as visitation (rather than invitation). Furthermore, Derrida’s hospitality of visitation involves a radical openness and vulnerability to the Other, even to the stranger who has not been invited, prepared for, expected or foreseen (“Hostipitality” 361). Thus, Derrida’s ethics are based on Levinas’s model of the Other as prior to and honored before the Subject.

In his 1993 volume of essays, *Specters of Marx*, Derrida extends these ethical concepts to the concept of “hauntology,” a play on words that displaces “its near-homonym ontology,” the

study of being—which, like Levinas, he critiques as overly emphasized in Western metaphysics (Davis 9). As critic Colin Davis summarizes, “[h]auntology supplants its near-homonym ontology, replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (9). Hauntology is fundamentally an ethical concept, involving the ethical imperative to offer “respect” and “*responsibility*” for “ghosts,” whom Derrida describes as all others who are not living at present. Ghosts are either those who have died or who have not yet been born, and hauntology thus extends to both the past and the future. In Davis’ words, “[a]ttending to the ghost is an ethical injunction insofar as it occupies the place of the Levinasian Other: a wholly irrecoverable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving” (9).

As Derrida himself acknowledges, much of his articulation of ethics can be attributed to Levinas. However, in the 1967 essay “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” he also criticizes Levinas. First, Derrida argues that Levinas’s articulation of encounter relies too much on the assumption of physical presence; in this way, the emphasis in *hauntology* on the Other as ghost, who marks both presence and absence, is a modification of Levinasian encounter of the Face. Furthermore, as theologian Steven Shakespeare summarizes, Derrida critiques Levinas’s ethics as

too idealized, too cut-off from the actual experience of otherness as we encounter it. For Derrida, there is no ethics without that relationship of sameness-in-difference between me and my other. Only this relationship can be the basis for me to desire the other’s well-being. The corollary of this is that the possibility of

violence can never be wholly eliminated from the world. There is no absolute peace or absolutely nonviolent ethics. (92)

While Levinas posits a subjectivity that extends to the Other as infinite, Derrida insists that a subject can only experience otherness “in finitude and mortality (mine *and* its)” (“Violence and Metaphysics” 114-15). Therefore, rather than an absolute extension of the subject in submission to the Other’s singular alterity, Derrida insists that “every reduction of other to a *real* moment of *my* life, its reduction to the state of empirical alter-ego, is an empirical possibility, or rather eventuality, which is called violence” (“Violence and Metaphysics” 128). In other words, the actual appearance of the other as finite and mortal always involves the possibility of the subject reducing the Other to his or her understanding. Consequently, the possibility of violence—that is, the conflict, oppression, and the bid for mastery that Levinas’s ethics aim against—always remains. Derrida does not disagree with Levinas’s goals, but insists upon the continued appearance of conflict and difference in encounters between the subject and Other. Derrida concludes not by giving up the project of peace or ethics, but instead espousing an “*economical*” ethics “as the most peaceful gesture possible” (“Violence and Metaphysics” 128). Thus, while Derrida ultimately affirms the significance of Levinasian thought in the aforementioned eulogy “Adieu,” his ethics nevertheless emphasizes the continued occurrence of difference and conflict in intersubjective relations.

Poethics: Contemporary Poetry and Ethics

In addition to the theories of Levinas and Derrida, I also draw on the work of poet and feminist critic Joan Retallack. Retallack’s concept of *poethics* foregrounds the ethical uses of language as it is deployed within aesthetic processes, particularly as it applies to the writing and

reading of contemporary poetic texts (12).³⁴ In *Poethical Wager*, Retallack considers ethics as the “Aristotelian concern for the link between an individual and public ethos in pursuit of the good life” that must be sought within the chaos of what she calls the “continuous contemporary” (11).³⁵ Retallack explains that the concept of poethics can be used both analytically, in the investigation of the ethical conditions and effects of form of specific literary texts, and descriptively, as a term “denoting what one takes to be the best uses of a positively constructive imagination in relation to contemporary conditions as they intersect with history” (43). By “best uses” Retallack refers to literature that “enacts, explores, comments on, further articulates, radically questions the ethos of the discourses from which it springs” (11). She advocates for poetic texts that develop attentiveness to the “continuous contemporary,” innovate through the creation of new forms and configurations of language, and welcome readers “into an ethos of the collaborative making of meaning” (12). Ultimately, the concept of poethics considers how acts of reading and writing particular aesthetic and generic forms constitute living certain ways of life

³⁴ Michael Eskin also uses the term “poethical,” but his sense is distinct from and narrower than Retallack’s. Eskin’s use of the term *poethics* “signifies [his] unique attitude—in the phenomenological sense” towards the dialogue between the specific poetic texts of Paul Celan and Osip Mandel’shtam as refracted “through the prism of Levinas’s and Bakhtin’s writings” (162). In this project, I apply Retallack’s sense of the term *poethics*, for it is both more general, allowing the space for a variety of inquiries into the relation between ethics and aesthetics within specific poetic texts, and more relevant to my project, as Retallack focuses on contemporary poetry and poetics.

³⁵ While Retallack foregrounds Aristotelian ethics in her definition, this does not necessarily foreclose the possibility of extending her formulation *poethics* alongside of the twentieth century ethics of Levinas and Derrida, although the twentieth century theorists espouse an ethics that emphasizes the self’s Other-orientation rather than the Aristotelian equilibrium invoked in the statement that describes “a link between an individual and public ethos.” Furthermore, Aristotle’s ethics is based on the individual’s use of reason, and Levinas’ ethics as first philosophy is situated as both prior to reason and a critique of the emphasis on the totalizing tendencies of ontology in the Western metaphysical tradition, including the work of Aristotle. However, some contemporary scholars of philosophy make the case that Aristotle and Levinasian ethics have much in common. For example, Christopher P. Long argues that Levinas retrieves the obfuscated legacy of Aristotelian ontology that “attempt[s] to do justice to the individual as such” (9). Furthermore, Claudia Barrachi argues that Levinas’s “modern” concept that encounter with “phenomena, the world, or nature” is a matter of *ethos* is in fact “*found in the heart of Greek thought*” as traced in the works of Aristotle (105). In addition to these scholarly efforts that find connections across the ancient and modern ethical philosophers, I read Retallack’s formulation of *poethics* draws on an understanding of ethics broad enough to encompass Aristotle’s and Levinas’s ethics as involving the individual’s pursuit of the good and his or her social responsibilities.

(12).³⁶ Both creators/writers and consumers/readers are called upon to consider the ethics of aesthetic production and consumption. To Retallack, aesthetic innovation is needed to change the ethos of the status quo and to disrupt the “fatal momentum” of mass culture, which encourages inward-seeking fantasy instead of active imagination, “a consumer-centered me-ethos” rather than responsible awareness, and capitulation to media saturation rather than attention to contemporary cultural conditions (33). I find Retallack’s observations about the contrast between innovative art and contemporary media culture particularly relevant to Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, and I draw on poethics most extensively in chapter two. Furthermore, Elizabeth Robinson, cites Retallack’s thinking on poethics as a direct influence on her exploration of ethics and poetic language.

Retallack also articulates the concept of the *poethical wager* by drawing on the concept of the bet that 17th century philosopher, Blaise Pascal famously describes in *Pensées*; she also cites the scientific concept of chaos theory as well. She argues that the “continuous contemporary” is a chaotic system in a fragile, dynamic equilibrium, and that the artist, like Pascal, grapples with a potentially crippling sense of radical uncertainty. Ultimately, however, the artist wagers—indeed, *must* wager—that change can occur as a result of sustained efforts over time (3). The possibility for cultural change—that is, “contributions to climates of value and opinion”—is akin to the “butterfly effect” (3). In other words, an artist cannot know or control the possible effects of his or her work, and consequences may be infinitesimal and subject to many “swerves.” Nevertheless, the artist hopes that a project may be useful, and so seeks to guide it with courage, concern, and responsible awareness. Retallack’s description not a claim for the artist heroically acting in isolation, for artistic projects must work through “some kind of

³⁶ Retallack poses the following questions as examples of what she means by poethical inquiry: what kind of life is one living when one reads experimental poetry, conventional I-lyric verse, modernist novels, or popular fiction? Or when one views films or watches television? (12).

dynamic equilibrium between intention and receptivity, community and alterity” (3).

Furthermore, in the kind of innovative contemporary poetry that Retallack is interested in, readers are an integral part of the aesthetic process, for they are invited to “realize the work for her- or himself. There’s always *at least* a dual perspective, that of poet and reader, two very different starting points of equal importance” (41).

Retallack theorizes an ethical model of writing and reading contemporary texts that presents alternatives to previous reading models. Buell observes that many critics engaged in literary-critical inquiry, while recognizing the social construction of texts, resist Roland Barthes’ poststructuralist reading model of “the death of the author” in order to claim the significance of some measure of authorial agency and intentionality (12). Critic Derek Attridge argues for as much in his acknowledgement of a literary work’s “authoredness” (“Innovation, Literature, Ethics” 26). Moreover, Retallack advances an ethical model of writing and reading that departs from the classic reader-response theory which, as Buell summarizes, transfers interpretive power from author to reader and celebrates the reader’s invention and appropriation (12). While Retallack’s insistence on active reader participation largely aligns itself with Hejinian’s concept of the “open text,” I read the phrase “dynamic equilibrium between intention and receptivity, community and alterity” as an important shift in emphasis from Hejinian’s reader-centered model to one in which ethical encounter occurs *between* reader and writer. As such, Retallack, like other critics engaged in literary-ethical inquiry, advances a model of reading that is akin “conscienceful listening” (Buell 12). Various readings might produce unpredictable “swerves” in the reception of any poetic text, but those productions result not from a power struggle between writer and reader, nor a power transfer from writer to reader, but, rather, as Attridge argues, a textual encounter that results in innovative and creative reading practices that emerge from

readerly responsibility (“Innovation, Literature, Ethics” 29). Retallack’s model allows room to respect some measure of authorial agency and intentionality, while acknowledging that it occurs within a larger matrix of community, context, and reader reception. In line with this respect for “authoredness,” my readings tend to treat the poetic texts of Rankine, Howe, and Robinson within the grain of their own writings on poetics. Accordingly, along with the readings of each writer’s poetry, I cite instances in their essays on poetics that signal the ethical intentions of their work, even as I significantly extend those poets’ observations to a larger literary-ethical framework that is based on the ethics of Levinas and Derrida.

Finally, Retallack’s ideas of the “*poethical* wager” and the “butterfly effect” provide a nuanced, and arguably realistic model of effecting cultural change through the production and consumption of poetry. This model contrasts some of the hyperbolic claims for revolutionary, political poetry in the 1960s and 1970s, such as certain writings by anti-war, second-wave feminist, or Black Arts Movement poets. Rather than delivering a model of poetry in which an empowered or, some might argue, domineering, poet-speaker transmits a direct message to move her readers (or listeners) to act for social change, the postlanguage poets I consider in this project engage in the kind of *poethical* wager that Retallack describes. As they signal their ethical intentionality and delineate social critiques in their poetic texts, Rankine, Howe, and Robinson allow space for reader interpretation. Furthermore, their poetry tacitly acknowledges an awareness that the possible cultural and social effects of their work may be modest in scope and unknowable to the poets’ themselves. I contend that the poetry by Rankine, Howe, and Robinson that I will consider in this project fulfills Retallack’s criteria for poethical texts, and, in the following chapters, I will use the term poethics both analytically and descriptively in my exploration of these texts.

Ethics, Encounter, and Address in Literature and Lyric

Retallack's indication of reading the text through the lens of a "dynamic equilibrium between intention and receptivity" highlights poetry as a discourse within a rhetorical context, in which the poet and reader both participate. Retallack thus departs from the traditional concept of poetry as monologic and implicitly emphasizes its rhetorical elements, including the poet's concern with address to readers and readers' active reception. I would like I extend Retallack's poethical model by turning to additional literary critics who have stressed the link between the rhetorical/performative and ethical dimensions of literature in general or lyric poetry in particular. In order to flesh out my considerations of literature and lyric in rhetorical/performative capacities, I draw on models of lyric and lyric subjectivity, including Derek Attridge's model of literature as a performance that is an event/encounter with otherness, Brewster's argument which emphasizes the lyric as discursive and performative, William Waters' approach to lyric address as indicating claims of responsibility on the reader, and Blasing's model of lyric subjectivity as a linguistic and rhetorical construct that builds its claims on ethical grounds and advances models of selfhood. These critics' emphasis on the rhetorical/performative dimensions of lyric poetry provides the foundation for my literary-ethical readings of postlanguage lyric poetry, for their writings productively describe the possibility of encounter—albeit one mediated, tenuous, and even ghostly—between a writer and reader through a poetic text.

In *Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge argues that literature is an event or performance that emerges between the acts of writing and reading. Attridge draws on the ethics of Levinas and Derrida to liken the reader's encounter with a "literary work" to an interpersonal

encounter.³⁷ Attridge emphasizes that, by “the other” he means “not, strictly speaking, a *person*” but “a relation—or a relating—between me, as the same, and that which, in its uniqueness, is heterogeneous to me and interrupts my sameness” (*Singularity* 33). This concept the other as a relation “between” the reading subject and a disruptive heterogeneity provides the basis of Attridge’s understanding of literature as emerging only as an event that occurs *between* writer and reader. Attridge defines a literary work as “an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (or acts-events) of writing that brought it into being as a potentially readable text” (*Singularity* 59); elsewhere, he extends the metaphor of staging to “acts-events” and asserts that “the literary work only exists in *performance*” (*Singularity* 95). Thus, Attridge posits the act of reading responsibly as an essential part of the performance that brings literary work into being. He consequently places a high ethical demand on the reader to recognize, with responsiveness and responsibility, the singularity and alterity of the artwork. Like Retallack, Attridge argues for the value of formally innovative art as that which “most estranges itself from the reader,” for it “makes the most sharply challenging . . . ethical demand” in its requirements that the reading subject re-shape his or her preconceived notions and approach to epistemology (*Singularity* 130). Thus, Attridge enjoins the reader to engage in “readerly hospitality, a readiness to have one’s purposes reshaped by the work to which one is responding” (*Singularity* 80). At the same time, Attridge emphasizes that demanding art facilitate further creative artistic works in turn. Therefore, Attridge claims that responsible reading is not a mere imposition of the author’s will on the reader, for it instead involves the reader both affirming the literary work’s singularity and responding with his or her own creative or critical work (*Singularity* 92-93). For my project, Attridge advances a valuable model for establishing the literary text as ethical

³⁷ Attridge chooses the term “literary work,” rather than Barthes’ “text,” to emphasize that literature is created by an author’s labor (*Singularity* 103).

encounter between writer and reader. Moreover, his understanding of ethical reading that both responsibly and creatively responds to previous artistic work provides a useful way of thinking about the highly allusive nature of the poetry of Rankine, Howe, and Robinson, which extensively cites and, at times, emulates, others' writings.

While Attridge's discussion of the ethics of reading and writing emphasizes the performative nature of all literature, I also draw on the work of critics who theorize lyric in particular as a performative or rhetorical form. Earlier, I noted my adoption of Barbiero's definition of lyric as the representation of the act of self-expression; other theorists have developed the notion of lyric as performance at greater length. In *Lyric*, a history of the genre, Scott Brewster focuses on the "lyric as a performance" (2). Brewster argues for a conceptualization of lyric text as performative by referencing J.L. Austin's speech-act theory, which conceptualizes performatives as statements that have "the capacity both to *say* and *do*, to *describe* and also *perform* an action" (41). Brewster foregrounds the lyric as discursive and performative in order to argue against the conventional understanding that lyric is expressive and monologic. Brewster argues, "lyric is fundamentally concerned with the conditions and nature of address" (2). Significantly, Brewster hearkens back to pre-Romantic poetic forms to emphasize a longer lineage of lyric poetry that is rooted in rhetoric and performance and that emerges in diverse forms in various cultures in the West since antiquity. His readings assert that, as we can trace lyric's roots to performance within larger community or public contexts, its performative dimension remains, and one must consider lyric as a discursive, rather than a monologic form that is focused solely on individual or private concerns.³⁸

³⁸ While Brewster acknowledges that some lyric poetry in some literary-historical periods have more of a tendency to be performed in public, he maintains that the performative nature of lyric is present in many examples of oft-presumed "expressive" lyric poetry, including British Romantic verse and twentieth-century American confessional poetry.

William Waters, in *Poetry's Touch: On Lyric Address*, also emphasizes the tendency of lyric poetry to be fundamentally concerned with address. Waters engages in an extended treatment of direct address in lyric poetry across European languages and historical periods from antiquity through the mid-twentieth century, with a focus on both poetic form and “phenomenology,” which he defines as “*what it is like to be someone reading (here, now)*” (15 n26).³⁹ Waters’ claim is that “we as readers may feel in second-person poems, in a poem’s touch, an intimation of why poetry is valuable, why it matters to us, and how we might come to feel answerable to it” (2). Waters argues that address is not just one linguistic feature among many, but “the meridian of all discourse” upon which language depends (5). Particularly significant for my project is Waters’ exploration of Paul Celan’s poetics of address. Waters considers the poetics of Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, whose metaphor of a message in a bottle to describe the way poetry is “sent” and “received” (150) is later adopted by Paul Celan’s poetics, as delineated in the well-known speech, “The Meridian” (151). Indeed, Celan’s thinking plays an important role of in this dissertation as well, for I apply his poetics of encounter to the poetry of Rankine and Howe, both of whom reference Celan in their writings. Waters also examines Celan’s metaphors of poetry as encounter, including the poem as handshake (which is cited by Rankine) and the poem as gift to the attentive. Based on his reading of Mandelstam’s and Celan’s poetics, Waters asserts that the reader/receiver can experience a sense of presence with the poet/sender, who may be distant or dead (151). Thus, while acknowledging that poetry cannot literally touch a reader, Waters’ argument emphasizes how “the fixity of the printed word can stir, and reach, and call,” thus gesturing beyond the disembodied medium to enable physical communication (161). Like Attridge, Waters emphasizes how literature links the acts of writing

³⁹ Waters claims that formal and “phenomenological” considerations, which carry different critical vocabularies, are ultimately “two sides of one coin,” and a discussion of form makes no sense without taking up the question of the reader’s experience (14).

and reading, which thereby places ethical demands on the reader to be answerable to the message that has been received. In Waters' words, "[w]hat is at stake . . . is our ability to acknowledge the claims made on us by works of art with which we engage" (158).

Whereas Waters focuses on the second person, a key theorist of the first person in lyric poetry is Mutlu Konuk Blasing, who, like Brewster, argues that the lyric, far from private self-expression, is "the most rhetorical of poetic genres" (34), "a social medium safeguarding a personal experience of language" (52). According to this line of thinking, lyric's use of language, as necessarily rooted in linguistic communities, always emerges from the interplay between the personal and the social. The lyric "I"—a linguistic construction that conveys "virtual subjectivity in the shape of a given language" and existing only in discourse (4)—is crucial in lyric's rhetoric. Blasing asserts that the lyric "I" is a rhetorical construction of a voice that depends upon the speaker's credibility and the authority of a shared linguistic code to persuade an auditor to trust the speaker. In other words, the lyric "I" and "the existential and historical subject-agent"—the person of the poet—"must *seem* to coincide" (31). The lyric subject's rhetoric necessarily entails ethics, for this "rhetorical coincidence is, properly, a moral ground, a figural coincidence that would convince us that the speaking 'I' stands by his words. Thus the intending 'I' as accountable for his words marks the ethical turn of the formal system, as well as linking the author and reader in a community sharing that intentionalizing turn of the 'I'" (31). In her emphasis of lyric as rhetoric, Blasing argues that "[p]oetic language . . . institutes the ethical figure of the intending speaker and marks a will to mean even as it secures a full view of the abyss" (35).⁴⁰ Of course, the ends of lyric as rhetoric are not merely to persuade readers to

⁴⁰ It is important to note that Blasing's argument allows for readings of, for example, Romantic, postromantic, Confessional, postconfessional, or "mainstream" lyric poetry as ethical, for, according to her argument, all lyric poetry institutes "the ethical figure of the intending speaker." This is distinct from Retallack, who values formally innovative work as potentially more ethical than "idealistic strain" of Romantic lyric verse. As I suggest here,

believe the lyric “I” seems to coincide with the speaker. Instead, as Izenberg explains, “[w]hen we describe a poem as having a ‘speaker,’ or as giving ‘voice’ to a person ... we are taking the artifice of voice in the poem to offer something like a model or a theory of the person, or even a pedagogy of personhood. In its orchestrations of perception, conception, and affect, a poem elaborates upon or expands the possibilities of what a person can see, think, and feel” (2).

Blasing’s view of lyric as rhetoric establishes several key parameters for my investigations: her approach establishes the lyric as rhetorical, and therefore provides an interface between the personal and social, rather than solely expressive; it articulates how the lyric and the establishment of the lyric “I” are always based on ethical grounds; and it articulates how “speaker” and “voice” advance models of subjectivity for readers of the poem.

I suggest that the poetry of the postlanguage lyric poets I investigate in this project can be illuminated by the theories of Brewster and Waters, in their emphasis on the lyric as rhetorical/performative/discursive, that is, concerned with address of readers. In addition, Attridge’s Levinasian emphasis on the literary as encounter and Waters’ emphasis on lyric as Celanian address, taken together, help to articulate the Levinasian-Celianian model of lyric as ethical encounter that serves as this dissertation’s foundational paradigm. Furthermore, Blasing’s model of lyric as rhetoric illuminates the ethics that postlanguage lyric poets advance as they retain revised versions of the lyric “I” in their poetry. Throughout the following chapters, I will reference the concepts of ethics and address by the aforementioned poets and literary critics in various analyses of specific poems. I now turn to poethical readings of specific poetic texts.

Blasing’s model nevertheless help to illuminate the projects of postlanguage lyric poets, who seek to retain an ethical version of the lyric “I” in a way that modifies many of the qualities that are associated with Romantic and confessional poetry.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FIRST PERSON, ETHICS, AND ENCOUNTER IN CLAUDIA RANKINE'S *DON'T LET ME BE LONELY: AN AMERICAN LYRIC*

The first poetic text I will explore in this project is the 2004 book, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* by contemporary African-American poet, Claudia Rankine. The guiding questions for my poethical reading of *DLMBL*, as for all of the poetic writings I consider, include the following: What model of lyric subjectivity does the text offer? How does Rankine present an ethical articulation of the lyric "I"? What ethics do Rankine draw from, and what ethics does she advance? What relations between writer and reader are advanced in the text, and how might they promote writing and reading as ethical practices?

This chapter also sets up important parameters for the project as a whole, for the text of *DLMBL* demonstrates the isolating, enervating, and deadening effects of the commonplace concept of autonomous subjectivity with concrete examples drawn from twenty-first century American culture. More than any other text I consider in this dissertation, *DLMBL* presents an extended critique of how various cultural discourses—including news media, cinema, television, political rhetoric, consumer capitalism, written texts of prose and lyric poetry—shape the contemporary American understanding of the "ideological I." Drawing on and responding to the consumerist, media-saturated, and politically divided culture of post-9/11 America in general and New York City in particular, Rankine's text demonstrates that the commonplace belief in a stable, self-determined subject—the self articulated in the ideology of possessive individualism—reflects a particularly American fantasy of autonomy. This fantasy of autonomy reinforces, and is reinforced by, a culture of spectatorship and consumerism that in turn perpetuates the pervasive social isolation and loneliness referenced in the title. The loneliness of

contemporary hyper-individualistic American culture is depicted in the text as producing a kind of living death.

As the text progresses, *DLMBL* counters the isolation and fatalism of autonomous subjectivity by asserting the relationality and response-ability of the subject through an emphasis on ethical practice. The text of *DLMBL* engages in ethical practice in two main ways. First, the text presents the speaking subject as shifting away from the role of distracted spectator and towards the position of poetic witness. Second, *DLMBL* offers textual strategies that counter commonplace ideas of the “I” with an ethical model of fragmented subjectivity that is circumspective insofar as it recognizes the subject as porous, that is, as shaped by interactions with exteriority. Additionally, the text advances ethical practice by theorizing how the lyric can be viewed as ethical encounter. Towards the conclusion of the text, *DLMBL* directly introduces the ideas of two central thinkers, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas and poet Paul Celan, whose respective thinking on ethics and poetics, taken together, provide the basis for a model of lyric poetry as ethical encounter between writer and reader. Rankine asserts that the acts of writing and reading, as ethical encounter, are critical to survival. The imperative of the title—*Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*—both invokes the textual theme of contemporary isolation and demands a response through the address of its readers. This use of the vocative enjoins readers to provide a companionship that does not necessarily bring easy solace to participants, but allows them to be more fully engaged and alive. Furthermore, the text of *DLMBL* positions the poet as a participant within encounters not only through its extension towards the reception of reading others, but also through conscious and creative responses to previous artists’ writings and performances. The Levinasian-Celanian model of lyric poetry as ethical encounter delineated in *DLMBL* is

foundational for this dissertation, for it will serve as a paradigm that the other poetic texts I investigate will both follow and depart from.⁴¹

I begin my reading of *DLMBL* with a general description of the text. I will then discuss how the text investigates concrete examples of the ways cultural discourses construct and reinforce the concept of autonomous and coherent subjectivity. I then consider the writing and

⁴¹ Some of the published critical discourse on *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* to this date intersects with mine insofar as it has examined issues of media saturation in contemporary culture and has considered the text in relation to political issues. In "Unheard Writing in the Climate of Spectacular Noise: Claudia Rankine on TV" (2009), Kevin Bell uses the Lyotardian concept of "drift" or "critical de-positionality" to argue that *DLMBL* implicitly critiques "the ideological position of critique itself" because the text suspends "the movement of intentionality that presumptively characterizes the standard practice of critique" (99). In Bell's argument, examples of "standard practice of critique" include the writings of Adorno, Debord and Baraka. Furthermore, in "Politics and Poetics of Fear after 9/11: Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*" (2011), Emma Kimberly argues that, in the fear-based, post-9/11 era, *DLMBL* uses multiple and parallel texts (visual, textual, footnotes) to model for readers a process of de-naturalizing media images by heightening awareness of their mediated nature. According to Kimberly, the process of media analysis allows for the interrogation of the responsibilities involved in making representations for public consumption. She argues that the text models a process by which we readers can extricate ourselves from the post-9/11, media-driven climate of fear, thus enabling more compassionate, genuine human relations.

Like Kimberly, I recognize both Rankine's emphasis on more compassionate human relations and the argument that media saturation are a hindrance to such relations. However, neither critic explores what I am calling a *poethical* examination of the writing and reading strategies that Rankine advances for poetry, that is, a consideration of how the writing and reading of poetic texts, especially in the deployment of the lyric "I," can be considered as a means of greater social connection and way of living an ethical life.

In "A Prescription Against Despair: On Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*" Erik Anderson acknowledges that *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* is not an overtly spiritual text, but argues that it can be read as prayer in that it "enacts the intersection of private and public grief, a ritual to address our wounds." While Anderson's argument covers much similar ground as mine, in its observation of the text's treatment of social issues and its poetics of lyric address, it does not focus on the ethics of either the text's deployment of the "I," nor the ethics of writing and reading as encounter.

In an unpublished dissertation from 2009, "Saying 'I am': Experimentalism and Subjectivity in Contemporary Poetry by Claudia Rankine, M. Nourbese Philip, and Myung Mi Kim," Dawn Lundy Martin takes up the issue of the lyric "I" in contemporary American women's poetry, with a particular focus on the articulation of the raced subject in poetry by women of color. While I consider some of the same issues that Martin does, particularly Rankine's exploration of fragmented subjectivity within the context of poetry debates on the lyric "I" within American cultural contexts, our methodology and conclusions are very different. Martin uses psychoanalytic and critical race theories to argue that Rankine's use of the fragmented "I" indicates both racial subject formation in particular and American subject formation in general, resulting from the pathology of melancholia, or inability to mourn for loss (8-9, 38). In contrast, I consider the deployment of the fragmented "I" in terms of its social responsibility and locate within that deployment the advancement for an ethical poetics that enables a means to ethical practice in writing, reading, and ways of living.

Furthermore, I must note that *DLMBL* has been anthologized in several ways that emphasize various aspects of possible interpretation. Swensen and St. John include an excerpt of it as an example of hybrid poetry in *American Hybrid*. Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray, who build on Swensen and St. John's model of hybridity, include an excerpt of *DLMBL* in *The New American Poetry of Engagement* that emphasizes the text's political investment as a poetry of witness. In another vein, Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith include a passage from *DLMBL* in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2011) that is arguably "conceptual" in that it not expressive or imaginative; the excerpt includes a transcription of a list of pharmaceutical companies "that filed suit in order to prevent South Africa's manufacture of generic AIDS drugs" (*DLMBL* 117).

reading strategies that *DLMBL* deploys to counter destructive cultural discourses with an ethically grounded first-person subject and the life-enhancing possibility of textual encounter between writer and reader.

Description of the Text

What does the text of *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* look like? *DLMBL* resists straightforward classification, for it is a hybrid text of prose, poetry and visual images. While its subtitle is *An American Lyric*, much of the text does not look like conventional lyric poetry. First of all, much of the verbal text does not conform to conventional lyric lineation, wherein the poetic line break is clearly demarcated on the right hand margin. The indexical classification of the book is “Lyric Essay/Poetry,” and, indeed, the majority of the text looks much more like prose and often reads like personal essay, life writing, and narrative, as it is presented in sentence and paragraph form and subscribes to syntactic and grammatical conventions for prose.⁴² The prose pieces take the form of brief, episodic narratives, which are presented as rooted in either the speaking subject’s interpersonal interactions or experiences of consuming contemporary media, especially television news. Often, these episodes are followed by digressions that take on the form of micro-essays. The prose text does not present a narrative arc: some of the essays and episodes build on or gesture back to the preceding material, while others emerge without clear connection to what appeared before.

A key element of the text is its tone. The speaker—often an “I,” but at times switching into other pronouns such as “we” or “you”—intones observations in a flat, detached way. The

⁴² In the micro-essay “Who is Flying this Plane? The Prose Poem and the Life of the Line,” Hadara Bar-Nadav uses *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* as an example of how, contrary to conventional expectations for prose poetry as having no line breaks, Rankine “write[s] both *through and against* the margin” (44). Bar-Nadav compellingly argues that the unique formatting of the published book compresses the text of Rankine’s prose poetry within narrow margins, and this form relates to the text’s content, for its “squeezed lines suggest how narrow the vision of America (and poetry) may be” (45).

dullness of tone corresponds to the limbo-like experiences of both insomnia and habitual television viewing, examples of which are invoked frequently in the content, as in the following, early passage: “In the night I watch television to help me fall asleep, or I watch television because I cannot sleep. My husband sleeps through my sleeplessness and the noise of the television. Eventually it is all a blur. I never remember turning the TV off, but always when I wake up in the morning, it is off. Perhaps he turns it off. I don’t know” (29). The flatness of the speaker’s tone establishes a frequently disoriented perspective and creates an atmosphere where “all” is a “blur,” permeated by indeterminacy and confusion. This particular passage goes on to describe antidepressant commercials; both depression and pharmaceutical treatments are discussed at several points in *DLMBL*. The flatness of tone indeed suggests a depressive, enervated state, indicating a speaker who is stymied despite, or perhaps because of, her considerable knowledge and thoughtfulness. Furthermore, the flat tone helps to establish the speaker as an anonymous everywoman whose personally identifying features emerge as if they were incidental.

The dulled, rather anonymous voice that distances itself from a particular identity is an interesting choice for Rankine, an African-American woman writer who was born in Jamaica in 1963 and immigrated to New York as a child. Indeed, the speaker of *DLMBL* casually alludes to her own gender, racial and cultural identities, as if in passing. While the prose style and references demonstrate the speaker’s advanced education, middle-class status, and age (on page 104: “It occurs to me that forty could be half my life or it could be all my life”), much of the text distances itself from strong identifications with gender. As in the example above, there are references to the speaker having a husband, and a cab driver in a reported dialogue refers to the speaker as seeming like a “smart lady,” (89) but these references to gender are interspersed

throughout the text, rather than serving as an object of focus. Moreover, allusions to the speaker's nationality and race are portrayed in relative terms: the same cab driver asks the speaker how many years she has been in the U.S. ("Over thirty") and if she has noticed "these white people, they think they are better than everyone else?" (89). While this dialogue demonstrates that the speaker is a woman of color from an immigrant background, a later passage emphasizes race, nationality, and class as relative classifications: "In third-world countries I have felt overwhelmingly American, calcium-rich, privileged, and white" (106).⁴³ Along with the speaker's deadened tone, the content of *DLMNBL* underscores the relativity, rather than fixity, of social identities. The text thus allows a platform from which to project the speaker's voice as an anonymous, enervated everywoman with whom a broad range of readers may readily identify.

Another major element of *DLMNBL* is its use of visuals. While much of the verbal text is presented in paragraph form, these paragraphs are often fragmented, for they are frequently disrupted by visual graphics such as photographs, illustrations, and diagrams. Thus Rankine incorporates what Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson call an "interface" between verbal and visual media. According to Smith and Watson, in life writing, "the interface is a site at which visual and textual modes are interwoven but also confront and mutually interrogate each other"; such interfaces may serve to contextualize an artist's self-representation by citing "sociohistorical sources that situate her individual 'I' in a cultural surround" (*Interfaces* 21, 25). The "cultural surround" that Rankine emphasizes is the twenty-first century electronic media landscape.

⁴³ Rankine's follow-up work, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), shares many qualities with *DLMNBL*, including the flat narratorial tone and a distanced speaker. However, *Citizen* marks a marked shift in Rankine's engagement with race. While *DLMNBL* takes up examples of black men in American who have been killed and terrorized, the central focus of *Citizen* is an extended exploration of white attitudes and behaviors towards African-Americans, including numerous examples of micro-aggressions, media portrayals of black celebrities and events such as Hurricane Katrina, publicized murders of black men and adolescents, and racial iniquities within the American criminal justice system.

Televisions appear with great frequency in *DLMBL*, both in form—as visual representations, sometimes displaying other visual images—and in content, as described in the verbal text. The text begins with the graphic image of a television set displaying white static on its screen; this same image appears throughout the book, dividing the text into sections that are otherwise unmarked. The narrating speaker of the text describes her channel surfing habits, and one can read the television screens as marking changes of the channel. Moreover, many of the photographs are displayed on a graphic illustration of television sets, and they originate from television, including stills from films, broadcast news programs, and advertisements. In addition to the juxtaposition of graphic illustrations and photographs, paragraphs are also disrupted by visual representations of other texts, such as words on a prescription bottle, a scrawled message scratched into a chalkboard, or a Google web site main search page on a computer. The text of *DLMBL* thus buffets its readers with visual images delivered through multimedia technologies, just as a stream of changing images continually inundates television viewers.

Rankine's text is highly allusive; in addition to the visual materials, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* includes cultural references ranging from “high” art to popular culture. For example, Rankine cites thinkers and writers like Hegel, Gertrude Stein, and Cornel West, films such as *Boogie Nights* and *The Wild Bunch*, and television shows such as *The Sopranos* and *Murder, She Wrote*. The allusiveness to multiple texts demonstrates a model of subjectivity as shaped largely through discourse, for the speaking subject is deeply embedded within a larger cultural fabric and intellectual exchange of ideas. Moreover, the text includes a large amount of factual information on topics ranging from current events in the media and politics to medical information. Rankine assiduously documents references and factual information in the endnotes, where she includes even more information on historical narratives, the pharmaceutical industry, and books of poetry

and philosophy. The erudite and allusive nature of the text presents the writing process as necessarily and consciously wide-ranging in areas of study, deeply engaged in contemporary events, and highly indebted to previous thinkers, writers, and artists.

The abundance of prosaic, visual, and academic elements of much of *DLMBL* calls the text's subtitle, *An American Lyric*, into question. What is lyrical about this text? And what is American about it? What features of conventional lyric does *DLMBL* embrace, and what do they depart from? More specifically, how does *DLBML* use form to explore lyric subjectivity as emerging from contemporary American cultural life?

On the one hand, there are passages of verbal text that conform to lyric convention. The overtly lyrical passages of *DLMBL* take the form of lyrical dialogues, which are interspersed throughout the text.⁴⁴ These dialogues are verbal fragments that frequently disrupt the prose paragraphs and look more like lyric poetry because they conform to conventional poetic lineation. These sections are set apart through considerable white space, as if Rankine is presenting block quotations or a dramatic script. While some of the lyrical dialogue fragments are reported as autobiographical accounts of the speaking subject's conversations, others are presented as possibly imagined or internalized exchanges with ambiguous participants, as in the following example:

I felt it too.

The loneliness?

I let it happen.

By feeling?

By not not feeling.

⁴⁴ These dialogic lyric passages appear frequently throughout the text, on pages 16, 31, 58, 62, 89, 99, 103, and 119.

That's too much ...
Like dying?
Maybe, or death is second.
Second to what?
To loneliness.
Define loneliness. (58)

This lyrical dialogue is typical of *DLMBL* in its presentation of an ambiguous speaking subject and an interlocutor and in its use of abstract language and content. Thus, the lyrical dialogues contrast sharply with the concrete specificity of much of the prose paragraphs and micro-essays of *DLMBL*. At the same time, these lyrical dialogues convey conventional lyric articulations of interiority and feelings, often focused, as they are here, on the titular theme of loneliness and its correspondence to death. However, in its ambiguity and abstraction, the speaker's interiority and emotion are indirectly represented, as in the use of the double negative; in this passage, the affect of the speaker's loneliness is experienced "By not not feeling." Thus, as Wills argues of Hejinian's *My Life*, we have interiority without "representation." Furthermore, the use of the lyric line to present dialogue alerts readers to a key departure from a conventional lyric's presentation as the self-expression of the poet who forges a unified voice to speak in a monologue. Although the topic of these exchanges is loneliness, the self in these lines is always in conversation. Rather than expressing the ideas and feelings of a solitary figure, the lyric lines deliver an exchange, one of question and answer, which underscores the self as dialogic. Whether these lyrical dialogues represent a self and another or an internal conversation, they articulate a concept of the speaking subject as a dialogic construction. Thus, while the presence of lyric dialogues preserves traditional lyric's affirmation of interiority and the significance of

individual emotion, it does so by shifting away from both a model of the lyric as monologic and from direct representation of a particular person's feeling.

In addition to the presence of lyrical dialogue, how else might *DLMBL* be considered lyrical? I suggest that the text asks readers to expand our notions of the postlanguage lyric to encompass more than the conventional lyrical poetic line. The extensive use of prose insists that we allow postlanguage lyric to take in a prosaic register in form, content, and character. The text therefore encompasses various contemporary cultural discourses directly, without the distortion of certain conventional lyric's "expressive" emotionality. The use of understated prose, frequently coupled with graphic and verbal depictions of the turn of the twenty-first century, stretches to point to both the overwhelming nature of contemporary catastrophes (9/11, the prevalence of violence perpetrated against African-American men, conflict in the Middle East) and the underwhelming inadequacy of response, both cultural (code-orange alerts, human rights violations in the American criminal justice system, Operation Iraqi Freedom, consumerism) and personal (antidepressants, electronically enabled voyeurism, channel surfing).

The use of understated prose is present an important passage that occurs early in *DLMBL*—one that I will return to again over the course of this chapter—where the speaker discusses watching a televised news report about George W. Bush's imperfect memory of the trial following the brutal murder of James Byrd, Jr. Byrd was an African-American man who was beaten and dragged to death in 1998 by three white supremacists in the town of Jasper, Texas. The discussion is interspersed with photographs of the ground where Byrd's dismembered body parts were found, and a photo of Byrd's face, taken while he was still alive. Byrd's photographic portrait is followed by subdued commentary:

I forget things too. It makes me sad. Or it makes me the saddest. The sadness is not really about George W. or our American optimism; the sadness lives in the recognition that a life can not matter. Or, as there are billions of lives, my sadness is alive alongside the recognition that billions of lives never mattered. I write this without breaking my heart, without bursting into anything. Perhaps this is the real source of my sadness. Or, perhaps, Emily Dickinson, my love, hope was never a thing with feathers. (23)

In the statement, “I write this without breaking my heart, without bursting into anything,” the “I” tries to distance herself from what can be the overpowering domination of the expressive poet in the throes of self-righteousness or hysterical emotion, for such extremes of affect place the focus on the poet herself. At the same time, the speaker settles on no easy place in terms of feeling, wondering if perhaps her *lack* of emotion is in fact the “real source of my sadness.” Emily Dickinson, who is often (but not always) considered to be an exemplary poet of American Romanticism, is then invoked as both a beloved and a foil. The speaker tentatively disagrees with the premise of Dickinson’s well-known poem, “Hope is the thing with feathers.” At this moment in *DLMBL*, hope is not perched in the speaker’s soul, singing continuously throughout storms, gales, chills, and seas, as Dickinson’s poem describes.⁴⁵ Instead, the text’s understated prose contrasts with Dickinson’s lyrical flights of imagination. If the conventional lyric, in its Romantic and postromantic lineage, is conventionally considered to be the expression of a sensitive, solitary figure, given to delicate gestures or emotionally charged flights of fancy, it is a genre that can all too easily reinforce the American optimism that is mentioned in this passage. This type of optimism, which Rankine acknowledges is theorized by Cornel West, is dangerous, for it implicitly denies the reality of American violence and suffering. *DLMBL* asserts that the

⁴⁵ The endnotes of *DLMBL* cite the entirety of Dickinson’s poem, “Hope is the Thing with Feathers” (136).

prosaic register in lyric is an important one for contemporary American life, for it can counter American fantasies that glorify individualistic “expression” and facile optimism.

Thus Rankine offers a different kind of American lyric: rather than being individualistic, it aims to speak for collective concerns; rather than being sensationalistic or hysterical, it is flat and understated; rather than being triumphalist or sensorially expressive, it gropes around in the darkness of despair, seeking for the possibility of hope. Moreover, this kind of postlanguage lyric must make room for the visual, to demonstrate and explore how our lives are shaped—indeed, often dominated—by visual and electronic media. *DLMBL* argues that, to represent the twenty-first century self within social and historical contexts, a poetic text must include the experience of events that are perceived through electronic media. The text’s engagement with the contemporary age—in all its mediated noise—is an intrinsic part of the poethical, as Retallack asserts: “a vital poetics must acknowledge the degree to which the rim of occurring and making is now formed by the electronic intimacy of this chattering, arguing, densely interimpacted, explosive planet” (13-14). Furthermore, Rankine fulfills Marjorie Perloff’s injunction in her 1991 book, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*:

[W]e must avoid the impasse of the Englit or Creative Writing classroom, where the literary text too often continues to be treated as an object detachable from its context, as if a ‘poem’ could exist in the United States today that has not been shaped by the electronic culture that has produced it. There is today no landscape uncontaminated by sound bytes or computer blips, no mountain peak or lonely valley beyond the reach of the cellular phone and the microcassette player. (xiii)

DLMBL constructs poetry that acknowledges our media landscape, and in so doing, it explores how contemporary notions of individuals’ experiences of selfhood are shaped by dominant

culture in the early twenty-first century, in particular, forces of electronic media that seem foreign to the natural landscapes of conventional lyric poetry.

Unlike much of the Language poetry that Perloff champions in *Radical Artifice*, Rankine aims to present the self in its social context while retaining the use of the first person singular pronoun. This choice to retain the “I” in her poetry involves the matter of representations of subjectivity. While Perloff and other advocates of Language poetry argued that poetic use of the “I” tends to reify individualistic notions of the self as coherent and disembodied, I argue that Rankine retains the “I” to advance a model of social selfhood in poetry as a corrective to commonplace, individualistic notions of subjectivity, which overemphasize the individual and de-emphasize social relations.

Subjectivity and Ethics

Don't Let Me Be Lonely interrogates commonplace attributes of subjectivity such as coherence and inviolability and explores how those concepts, in turn, reinforce atomization in American life. Rankine is clearly influenced by poststructuralist thought, and her writings take up the problems of the myth of autonomy in language and culture. In an essay on poetic subjectivity, “The First Person in the Twenty-first Century,” which appears in a 2001 critical anthology on poetics, *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, Rankine focuses on the use of the textual “I” to consider how language both represents and reinforces particular concepts of selfhood. She opens the essay by asking, “Is it fair to say there is, in the twenty-first century, a greater consensus toward the notion that true coherency is fragmented?” (132). This rhetorical question signals her affinity with poststructuralist challenges to traditional accounts of coherent subjectivity; the “greater consensus” that she gestures to, but does not name, would be obvious to readers in the academy familiar with poststructuralist challenges to the concept of autonomous

subjectivity. The problem with the conventional textual strategy of a straightforward, unselfconscious deployment of the “I,” Rankine argues, is that it considers the self divorced from social context. Rankine rejects the use of the “I” as a kind of disembodied Cartesian *cogito* by emphasizing that the self does not exist outside of time in a suspended state: “the ‘I’ exists in time and is married to biological, personal, historical, and cultural meaning” (132). Thus Rankine allies herself with poststructuralist critiques of metaphysical and ideological accounts of unified subjectivity.

Nevertheless, Rankine does not abandon the use of the first person. Instead, Rankine aims to reconfigure the use of the “I” to articulate a relational self. This resonates with Burkitt’s concept of “social selves”; as Burkitt argues, while traditional accounts of unified subjectivity, both metaphysical and ideological, have been and ought to be critiqued, the notion of selfhood need not and should not be discarded completely. Instead, the self can be re-envisioned as fundamentally relational, emerging through social relations and dialogues (27). Burkitt’s emphasis on the relationality of the self is a useful articulation of Rankine’s concept of re-envisioned “I,” one that is embodied, embedded within social contexts, and “fragmented” through relations with others. Furthermore, viewing the subject as inherently relational carries ethical implications, as philosopher Kelly Oliver argues: “insofar as we *are* by virtue of our environment and by virtue of relationships with other people, we have ethical requirements rooted in the very possibility of subjectivity itself. We are obligated to respond to our environment and other people in ways that open up rather than close off the possibility of response” (15). Indeed, in “The Twenty-first Century,” Rankine frames the exploration of subjectivity in ethical terms, for she frames “the constant investigation of subjectivity” as a “moral search” whose aim “should be what it means to be human” (135-6). I will explore in

more depth the ethical advancement of relational subjectivity in *DLMBL* later in this chapter; at this point, I turn to Rankine's examination of the problems of coherent subjectivity.

In "The First Person in the Twenty-First Century," Rankine frames the issue of the textual representation of selfhood as a dichotomy in which two different conceptions of subjectivity—the fragmented self and the commonplace idea of the unified self—correlate to two different kinds of texts. Rankine argues for the "fragmented text" that conveys the self as "broken into," which she implicitly opposes to a conventional, coherent text that espouses and relies on coherence of the writing subject (132). To frame the two textual alternatives—fragmented and coherent—Rankine uses the metaphors of reality and fantasy. To Rankine, the straightforward use of "I" is a conventional textual strategy that indulges in fantasy and mythologized privilege: "To abandon the fragmented text—this is the fantasy—is to encounter a world of homogeneity, a single 'I,' the stillness of it fixed by time; this, we are to believe, is a privilege. But not to recognize the instability inherent in any assertion of the first person is to believe that the gated community of the text is a place suitable only for fantasy worlds" (135). In this description, Rankine characterizes as politically conservative those who would preserve the status quo with the "stillness" and "wholeness" of the first-person subject through indicators of wealth and status such as "homogeneity," "privilege," and "gated community of the text." Rankine's use of such economic and demographic terminology indicates that the assertion of the "coherent" self she critiques is based on the concept of possessive individualism and its attendant power dynamics. The text as "gated community" correlates to those with wealth and power who would close themselves off in a protective bubble, separated from the perceived threat of those who lack "privilege" and would contaminate the "homogeneity" of the single "I." For Rankine, textual coherence perpetuates the pervasive cultural idealization of possessive individualism.

Textual fragmentation, however, seeks to upset convictions in possessive individualism and, accordingly, the power dynamics of the status quo.

For Rankine, the representation of coherence in language comes with high stakes. Rankine argues that the Western fantasy of coherent subjectivity, the notion that the self is whole unto itself, is laden with dangerous power dynamics. “The First Person in the Twenty-first Century” links coherent subjectivity and violence:

[W]hat happens to a coherent subjectivity that has mythologized itself through privilege as privilege? No “I” in my mind’s eye is the whole of anything. I am a part and so, torn apart by the aggression of the uninterrupted. Hyperbolic as this sounds, I look around and see the illusion of wholeness and surety inciting the Crusades, slavery, the Battle of Little Big Horn, *Shoah*, Hiroshima, Pearl Harbor, Vietnam, etc. (135)

Rankine reads the illusion of coherent subjectivity as a key element in the conceptual grounds that underpin historical events of violence and oppression. That is, those in power and privilege who are convinced of their separation from others feel justified in their own superiority; they dehumanize those they see as enemies or inferiors. This dehumanization ultimately results in violence towards those who occupy disempowered social categories. Rankine mostly focuses on the concept of coherent subjectivity as emerging from Western historical conditions and contributing to catastrophes of European and American genocide of indigenous peoples, the enslavement of Africans, and the Imperialist bid for global dominance. Rankine’s own subject position can add an illuminating dimension to this argument: as an African-American woman who emigrated from Jamaica to the U.S. with her family when she was a child, Rankine’s racial

status and national origin places her outside of several categories of privilege, which allows her a perspective on coherent subjectivity as a mythology built on the material conditions of privilege.

When Rankine links the concept of coherent subjectivity and oppression in Western history, she is making an argument along similar lines as that of Emmanuel Levinas. Although Levinas is from a very different cultural background than Rankine's, his experience as a Jewish Holocaust survivor in mid-twentieth century Europe also offers an outsider subject position from which to critique Western philosophy and politics. Like Rankine, Levinas argues that the individual self's "right to exist" as celebrated in Western philosophy and politics has had disastrous consequences for humanity. In his essay "Ethics as First Philosophy," Levinas alludes to Pascal's phrase "my place in the sun," which identifies the Western subject as egocentric and imperialistic. Levinas argues that conventional Western subjectivity assumes a "given world at its disposal".⁴⁶

. . . my "place in the sun," my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing? Pascal's "my place in the sun" marks the beginning of the image of the usurpation of the whole earth. (82)

Like Levinas, Rankine reads possessive individualism and its illusion of coherent subjectivity—the myth that the self can survive alone—as a key element in the conceptual grounds that underpin historical events of violence and oppression in the West. Because of the high stakes involved, Rankine opposes the articulation of coherent subjectivity in language through any straightforward deployment of the first person singular. Since the link between the illusion of coherent and autonomous subjectivity with acts of violence and degradation sounds

⁴⁶ This phrase is taken from Levinas's essay, "Transcendence of Words," which Rankine also cites in *DLMBL*.

“hyperbolic,” as Rankine acknowledges, it is fruitful to fill in the steps of the link she makes. The text of *DLMBL* offers specific examples of how Rankine works through connections of the concept of coherent subjectivity and violence within contemporary American cultural discourses. I will now turn to examples of how *DLMBL* presents cultural discourses, which draw on examples from mass media (cinema, television, print and broadcast journalism, and advertising) that illustrate how American culture reinforces the mythology of possessive individualism.

Autonomy: A Law Unto Oneself

In what ways does *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* demonstrate how contemporary American cultural discourses reinforce commonplace convictions about autonomous subjectivity? Furthermore, how does the text link the cultural formation of the “ideological I” with unethical behaviors that Rankine outlines, such as violence and oppression? I suggest that *DLBML* approaches cultural discourses that approach autonomous subjectivity through the analysis of the dual figures of the cowboy and the terrorist, heroic and villainous types who both represent autonomy in contemporary American culture.

In an early section of *DLMBL*, Rankine investigates the American fantasy of static, autonomous selfhood through the cultural myth of the cowboy as depicted in cinematic iconography by discussing Spaghetti Westerns in general and Sam Peckinpah's 1969 film *The Wild Bunch* in particular. The text also includes an illustration of a television displaying a representative film scene of three cowboys in the middle of a shoot-out in the Old West: the trio are brandishing guns and riding horses through plumes of desert dust (25). The textual and visual invocation of American cowboy mythology raises associated qualities of rugged individualism: self-determination, toughness, and stoicism. If one considers the etymology of the word “autonomy”—*auto*, “self” and *nomos*, “law”—it is clear that the term “autonomy” refers to the

condition of being a law unto oneself. The iconic figure of the cowboy, as depicted in the imaginary world of the movie and television screens, has been traditionally conceptualized as either an “outlaw” or as a heroic vigilante who takes the law into his own hands. Thus, the American cowboy ethos perpetuates the belief that the subject can establish one’s own laws and thus determine one’s own destiny. In her discussion of the cowboy in Spaghetti Westerns, Rankine emphasizes the centrality of *fantasy* for the autonomous American cowboy ethos, specifically “the American fantasy that we will survive no matter what” (25). The myths of immortality and coherence are two elements of the same American conviction in an autonomous self who remains unbroken by outside events, persons, history, culture, or mortality.

The fantasy-based cowboy ethos is far from benign. Autonomy, the condition of being a law unto oneself in a lawless land, is predicated on the use of force, as the still image of movie cowboys involved in a shootout indicates. Rather than focusing on a depiction of triumphant heroism or vigilante justice, the text focuses on *The Wild Bunch*, a film in which all the main characters die in a final shoot-out. This passage therefore emphasizes the nihilism and violence of outlaws who have no social obligations or hope of any larger meaning. The text accompanying the image of the cowboy shootout states, “Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* is worth watching because the cowboys in it have nowhere to get to. They’re older and they don’t have to make it anywhere because where they are is all there is or rather the end of a genre. Theirs is not the Old Testament—no journey to take; nothing promised; no land to land in” (25). The commentary on *The Wild Bunch* portrays the dark side of the myth of rugged individualism through negation. Rankine contrasts the cowboys, as true “outlaws,” with the Israelites in the Old Testament. In this reading, the freedom that the cowboy figure exemplifies relies on lack—these cowboys have freedom but no covenant and, therefore, no promised land. Their destruction and

self-destruction is the manifestation of autonomy, where the individual provides a law unto oneself, and it is shown to be a life lived through—and ultimately ended by—violence.

Rankine reads the fantasy-laden cowboy icon as both an exemplar of static selfhood and also a projected fantasy of white American masculinity, thus linking the coherent subjectivity of possessive individualism to privileged social status. Significantly, Rankine positions the cinematic iconography of the cowboy within dynamic cultural and political contexts. While, as noted on the opening page of *DLMBL*, in the mid-twentieth century, the people who died on television were either “Black” or “were wearing black” (5), all the cowboys in *The Wild Bunch* die, even though “they are handsome, white, leading men not dressed in all black” (25). Rankine acknowledges that *The Wild Bunch*, produced in the Vietnam era, in fact signifies the “end of a genre” that also marks the decline of the era of postwar American heroics (25, 137). With “no land to land in,” the cowboys in *The Wild Bunch* negate the promise of Manifest Destiny and its concomitant American Dream.

While the cowboy movie genre has not returned to the sartorial simplicity of black hats vs. white hats, the cultural iconography of the cowboy, and its polarized moral logic, circulated potently within the post 9/11 era of *DLMBL*’s composition and publication. During his presidency, George W. Bush famously invoked the idealized figure of cowboy, referenced “Wanted: Dead or Alive posters from the Old West in his quest for Osama bin Laden, and used black-and-white rhetoric to characterize opposition to his administration. Rankine references Bush’s rhetoric and the post-9/11 cultural climate later in the text: “Now it is the twenty-first century and you are with us or you are against us. Where is your flag?” (91).⁴⁷ After this question, a photograph follows of a man holding up an American flag so large that it conceals most of his person. The speaking subject then ponders, “It strikes me what the attack on the

⁴⁷ “Bush: Bin Laden Wanted Dead or Alive.” *abcnews.go.com*. 2001 Sept. 17. Web. 2015 June 3.

World Trade Center stole from us is our willingness to be complex. Or what the attack on the World Trade Center revealed to us is that we were never complex” (91). The American cowboy ethos of the Bush administration’s post-9/11 political rhetoric bespeaks a simplistic and rigid moral worldview that dehumanizes perceived enemies, justifies warmongering, silences critics, and implicitly reverts to the mythology of white American masculine privilege. Thus, considered in the context of the Bush era’s political rhetoric, the text’s reading of the autonomous American cowboy figure in Spaghetti Westerns in general and *The Wild Bunch* in particular resists the revitalized American cowboy ethos in post-9/11 American culture.

DLMBL also draws directly from contemporary political events to consider the other, salient outlaw figure from American cultural discourse: the terrorist. While *DLMBL* briefly alludes to the cultural hysteria surrounding the figure of Osama bin Laden, the text resists the commonplace equivalence between terrorism and Muslims from the Middle East. Instead, Rankine considers the 2001 execution of the domestic terrorist, Timothy McVeigh, a disgruntled U.S. Army veteran and white supremacist who killed 168 people in the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. *DLMBL* notes Timothy McVeigh’s use of the poem “Invictus,” which McVeigh delivered in lieu of a “final statement to the media” before his execution (47). In so doing, Rankine draws connections among violence, the American myth of autonomy, and poetry that espouses coherent subjectivity. This passage is structured like many of the episodes in *DLMBL*: it is a prosaic meditation framed by the speaking subject’s experience of watching the news on television. It begins by referencing a news report on McVeigh’s victims and includes a graphic illustration of a television that features the photograph of an empty chair outfitted for execution by lethal injection (140). The verbal text highlights McVeigh’s privileged social status as a white man by suggesting that, because he is “visually the

American boy next door,” the media attempts “to immunize him from his actions” with a focus on the possibility of forgiveness (47). The text then considers how McVeigh used poetry reveal his conviction in inviolable subjectivity as an extreme form of possessive individualism. McVeigh had scrawled the famous lyric poem “Invictus” by Victorian poet William Earnest Henley on a piece of paper as his final statement before his execution. In the discussion of McVeigh’s execution, the text cites the well-known closing lines of Henley’s poem: “‘It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll, I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul’” (47).⁴⁸ The quoted lines of Henley’s poem trumpet self-determination, and they demonstrate McVeigh’s conviction that his subjectivity was entirely autonomous, beholden to no social compact. Placed in the context of McVeigh’s execution, the quoted lines from Henley’s poem highlight the domineering and militaristic overtones of the deployment of the coherent first-person subject, who claims to be “master” and “captain” of an inviolable self. Rankine’s reference to McVeigh’s quotation of “Invictus” illustrates the connection she sees among coherent poetic subjectivity, possessive individualism, and violence, for, as a domestic terrorist, McVeigh’s dangerous fantasy of autonomy transformed into the violent reality of his actions.

The poetic lines from “Invictus” serve as a foil to the project of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, which aims to construct a different kind of “American lyric.” “Invictus” may be understood by many contemporary Americans as an exemplary model of traditional lyric, that is, one that is easily recognizable as “poetry” as we have been taught in school classrooms: its rhyme and meter is regular, its tone is triumphant, and its function can be interpreted as “inspirational.” Furthermore, although Henley was a Victorian Englishman, not an American, “Invictus” can be

⁴⁸ Notably, unlike other lines of cited poetry in the main text or endnotes of *DLMBL*, Henley’s lines are not presented formally, with offset margins and clearly demarcated lineation. By not honoring the text’s poetic line, *DLMBL* visually signals disapproval of the original lyric, McVeigh’s appropriation, or both.

interpreted as a celebration of grit and self-reliance, which are often mythologized as particularly American values. In contrast, largely prosaic text of *DLMBL* deflates the triumphalist tone of Henley's lines, which accords with the bombast and jingoism that surfaced in American post-9/11 public rhetoric. Furthermore, the lyric subjectivity of "Invictus" can be read as a foil to Rankine's re-articulation of the poetic first-person subject. If the conventional lyric, in its postromantic lineage, is considered to be the expression of a solitary figure, given to emotionally charged flights of imagination and grand gestures, it is one that can readily buttress the mythology of American possessive individualism. *DLMBL*, written in post-9/11 America, seeks to write a different kind of lyric with a different poetic subject.

The cowboy and the terrorist are two cultural types that have been particularly potent in the post 9/11 era. The representation of both of these figures *DLMBL* resist the romanticized or exotic stereotypes circulating in twenty-first century culture: the cowboys in *The Wild Bunch* are not romanticized, nostalgic heroes, but participants in nihilistic destruction, while the terrorist the text discusses at length is neither foreign nor Islamic but the "American boy next door." In contrast with stereotypes, *DLMBL* links both kinds of outlaw figures, who seek the fantasy of autonomy, as ultimately participating in a living death. The cowboys in *The Wild Bunch* embark on an expedition to nowhere but their inevitable deaths: "For them, life and death are simultaneously equal and present" (25). Similarly, in a discussion on terrorism, Rankine references Hegel's essay "Philosophy of Right" to observe that the terrorist is truly outside the law because he does not fear death and therefore cannot be controlled "by governments and councils" (84). Rankine paraphrases Hegel's point that "terrorists embody that state of beyond; they are freedom embodied. They bring life to that deathly state of lawlessness" (84). Consequently, there is a breakdown in social relations: "The relationships embedded between the

‘I’ and ‘we’ unhinge and lose all sense of responsibility. That ‘you,’ functioning as other, now exists beyond our notions of civil and social space” (84). As with the cowboy in *The Wild Bunch*, the ultimate “freedom” of the terrorist comes at the cost of being marked in the cultural sphere as already dead (84). In these discussions, the text assigns the cherished American ideal of freedom to the provenance of the outlaw and the condition of living death. The autonomy of possessive individualism is thus irresponsibility, a space in which the ties between the “I” and “you” are severed. This reading of autonomous subjectivity as linked to irresponsibility, violence, and living death indicates that Rankine’s understanding of ethical subjectivity must be configured within social relations.

The Commodified Subject

In addition to the investigations of cultural iconography that focus on the American myth of autonomy, *DLMBL* critiques the economic processes of American consumer capitalism that reduce individuals to participants in a market economy. The concept of possessive individualism, born of the marriage of Western individualism and capitalism, advances the idea of the self as sole proprietor of its qualities and capabilities. Burkitt argues that “this type of individualism could be corrosive of human society, because each person is understood as bound to others only through the competitive market and nothing more” (2-3). In *DLMBL* this reduction of individuals to participants in a market economy is illustrated in an example of the speaking subject’s sister, whose two children have both died in a car accident. The speaker has a telephone conversation with her sister about meeting with an insurance claims adjuster: “my sister is distracted because she has been asked to assess the value of her dead children’s lives. She has to meet with an insurance adjuster. . . . He wants her to put together information on her children, think of it as a

scrapbook, he'd said. Report cards, medical records, extracurricular activities" (77). Rankine analyzes the use of this "scrapbook":

Each activity is a sign, a sign that points to social class, which points to potential worth. The private school, the tennis lessons, the soccer team, the scuba medal, the collection of exotic fish or lack thereof were all heading somewhere. It is not a destination we need to arrive at since clearly the children did not arrive there. Ultimately no one lives in that place. It is a place of compensation divorced from compassion. (78)

The text aims to render absurd the quotidian activity of life insurance claims adjustment. Rankine frames insurance claims as an activity that demonstrates the "corrosive effects" of possessive individualism: worth is tied to signifiers of consumption and, therefore, class. In the nowhere place of "compensation divorced from compassion," human lives are assigned a dollar amount. In a market economy, the devastation of death is compensated monetarily, a move the text frames as incommensurate.

Additionally, *DLMBL* critiques possessive individualism as it emerges through consumer culture. *DLMBL* resonates with a body of cultural criticism that argues that, in a Western contemporary culture dominated by consumer capitalism, the subject is so profoundly shaped through the purchase of commodities that the distinction between the self and purchased commodities becomes elided. The ethos of possessive individualism has its roots in the ideals of enlightened, rational self-interest, but rather than viewing participation in consumer capitalism as a rational choice that individuals make, some cultural critics argue that the perception of selfhood is affected by processes of advertising and consumption on a fundamental level. For example, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that identity has altered in the globalized

contemporary age, which he calls “liquid modernity,” for so many people are not tied to local places and communities. Within “liquid modernity,” as older communities have become dislocated, we go shopping for identities and means for basic social interactions, just as we do fashions on sale (74). Bauman argues that it is important to see that contemporary consumer capitalism does not organize consumer life through normative regulations but *seduces* them through the manipulation of consumers’ desires for commodities (76). Sut Jhally shares this emphasis on seduction and further emphasizes the processes of advertising. Jhally argues that consumer capitalism works through the process of marketing: the “power of advertising comes from the need for meaning. . . . If it is manipulative, it is manipulative with respect to a real need: our need to know the world and to make sense of it, our need to know ourselves” (196). Far from being meaningless activities, we watch television, respond to advertising, and participate in the consumption of commodities precisely because these activities provide answers in our search for who we are.

Viewed in conjunction with Bauman and Jhally’s insights on the subjectivity within consumer capitalism, *DLMBL* offers concrete examples of how the distinction between the subject and commodities is so easily elided. Rankine presents the speaking subject as a consumer who realizes that, pre-9/11, the sense of self that she had previously found inviolable has turned out to be built on the commodities she had purchased. At one point, the speaking subject hearkens back to a pre-9/11 age, not as a golden era, but as a commodified one in which identity was purchased: “My flushing toilet, my hot water, my air conditioner, my health insurance, my, my, my—all my my’s were American-made. This is how I was alive. Or wasn’t alive. I was a product, or I was like a product, a product of and like Walt Disney’s cell animation—stylishly animated, somewhat comic. I used to think of myself as a fearless person” (93). In this list of

possessions, Rankine emphasizes commodities that middle-class Americans tend to think of as necessities to keep consumers feeling clean, comfortable, healthy, and safe. Thus Rankine points to how the idea of inviolable selfhood within possessive individualism—confident, fearless, protected—is a construct built out of the commodities that consumers purchase. Moreover, by remarking that “all my my’s were American-made,” Rankine observes that the construction of a “fearless,” inviolable self through consumption of commodities is a particularly American phenomenon, born out of the “American fantasy that we will survive no matter what” (25). As in the arguments of Bauman and Jhally, Rankine argues that our sense of self is one that cannot exist without products; thus, the distinction between “my my’s” and the self collapses, so that, ultimately, “I” is virtually a “product.” Furthermore, Rankine’s comment “This is how I was alive. Or wasn’t alive,” asserts that our drive to purchase what are perceived as necessities to stay alive robs us of the very life we seek to preserve. Selfhood, constructed out of commodities, allows us the feeling of inviolability, but this is ultimately an illusion.

DLMBL further argues that advertising perpetuates possessive individualism by promoting a subjectivity constituted by commodified and idealized representations of the self. Rankine characterizes the U.S. in the boom times of the late twentieth-century as a culture obsessed with finance and consumerism: “To roll over or not to roll over that IRA? To have a new iMac or not to have it? To eTrade or not to eTrade? Again and again these were Kodak moments, full of individuation; we were all on our way to our personal best. America was seemingly a meritocracy. I, I, I am Tiger Woods. It was the nineties” (91). Rankine points out how the American late-twentieth century preoccupation with finance and consumption offered identities packaged by commodities and marketing slogans. In the discourses of advertising, self-improvement entirely takes the form of consumption and market participation. For example, the

“individuation” of the self, what marks off one as distinct from others, is captured and displayed as “Kodak moments.” The concept of the “Kodak moment,” itself an advertising slogan, encourages individuals to experience oneself only through the documentation of an idealized self-representation, which is possible only through the purchase of commodities. Furthermore, Rankine’s reference to Nike’s 1997 marketing campaign, “I am Tiger Woods” illustrates the kind of social function that Jhally argues advertising serves (148). Rankine points out how, in the 1990s, Nike seized upon discourses of social progress, self-improvement, and the American dream. She highlights how Nike played on Americans’ desire to believe that they live in a “meritocracy” where everyone across racial and ethnic boundary lines is given the opportunity to succeed, as exemplified by Tiger Woods, who comes from a multi-racial background. But the text points to how the images of meritocracy and multiculturalism did not so much represent a reality as it did broadcast advertising campaigns whose motives were profit-based. What may look like something new—a man of color achieving in a sport long dominated by privileged white men—was a valorization of possessive individualism, with Tiger Woods as a contemporary exemplar of the self-made man. The message from Nike’s advertising encourages the consumer to identify with an idealized self-image, to buy the idea “I, I, I am Tiger Woods” when “I,” average Joe consumer of Nike products, will never be an exemplary multi-millionaire like Tiger Woods. Advertising leads consumers, who are searching for identity, to a false identification that is ultimately pre-packaged, superficial and empty.

In addition to exploring how marketing and consumerism packages the self as a product, *DLMBL* explores the concept of branding within advertising. The text provides an illustration of how the selfhood of the consumer becomes lost within the processes of advertising, branding,

and consumption as the speaking subject describes a conversation she has while visiting her grandmother in a nursing home:

My grandmother tells me that since the doctor told her to stay away from cigarettes she now smokes the longest ones she can find. Actually she continues to smoke a pack of Marlboros a day. I tell her Philip Morris is changing their name to Altria. From behind a screen of smoke my grandmother says, We should all change our names when we don't like what we see in the mirror. It's an easy way to distance the self from the self, I say for the conversation's sake (109).

The endnotes to this episode cite a study on Philip Morris published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, which reported “the company’s name change was a public relations effort to divorce itself from its reputation as primarily a tobacco company without actually hurting its sales in those divisions” (151). In the endnote, Rankine identifies the corporate method of “re-branding” as a cynical ploy for profit-based motives. In the main text, re-branding is extended to an activity that the subject can engage in. This re-branding can be read as an activity enabled by and indicative of Bauman’s concept of “liquid modernity,” in which identities and social connections within a globalized marketplace are so unstable and fluid that they can be made and re-made through the purchase of commodities. Rankine sees this casual type of identity shopping as a method leading to self-alienation, “an easy way to distance the self from the self.” She likens consumption to corporate re-branding, an indication that the self lacks integrity.

Furthermore, this passage underscores that, while modulating who one is through the purchase of different commodities, the consumer’s power is quite limited. In this example, the grandmother, consuming the damaging product that Philip Morris sells and profits from, thinks she is a more powerful consumer than she is. She believes that she outsmarts her doctor by

smoking longer cigarettes in order to smoke fewer and therefore be healthy, but the truth is, her consumption habits are virtually unchanged, and they benefit the company, not herself. As a result, her person has become lost in the commodity: she is visually described as partially concealed behind cigarette smoke. This example presents a double layer of hiddenness: Philip Morris tries to hide themselves through re-branding, which is essentially a process of mystification, while the grandmother is shrouded behind the consumed commodity, hidden from view. The image of the cigarette smoke implies that the cigarettes the grandmother consumes in fact consume her body. Rankine explores how the processes of advertising seduce consumers into thinking commodity consumption can provide a means of shaping and identifying the self, with the result that the consumer alienated, lost within the commodity that is being consumed.

While the body of the grandmother is consumed through cigarette smoking, *DLMBL* includes an exploration of how a consumer's body, and therefore sense of self, can be distorted through body-altering commodities such as Botox. Rankine notes that Botox, approved by the FDA in 2002, can diminish the appearance of ageing by lessening the appearance of frown lines (150). To Rankine, the diminishment of the appearance of ageing seeks to defy mortality but ultimately erases the life that has been lived by distorting the body. After remarking that she has just turned 40, she states,

On television I am told I don't want to look like I am forty. Forty means I might have seen something hard, something unpleasant, or something dead. . . . With injections of Botox, short for botulism toxin, it seems I can see or be seen without being seen; I can age without ageing. . . . I could purchase paralysis. I could choose that. Eventually the paralysis would sink in, become a deepening personality that need not, like Enron's 'distorting factors,' distort my appearance.

I could be all that seems, or rather I could be all that I am—fictional. Ultimately I could face reality undisturbed by my own mortality. (104)

Through the purchase of Botox, individuals can hide behind a mask of paralysis. The purchased paralysis, which appears to be only on the surface of one's face, permeates the self. This is because, as Rankine points out, our previous experiences become embodied; our faces are indelibly marked by having seen "something hard, something unpleasant, or something dead." Rankine plays on the irony that contemporary Americans read actual life and death experience as that which distorts facial features, when Botox, the paralyzing agent, is in fact doing the distortion. Rankine's insistence upon the embodiment of previous experience aligns her thinking with Smith and Watson, who argue, "the body is a site of autobiographical knowledge because memory itself is embodied" (*Reading Autobiography* 49).

Furthermore, Rankine points out how Botox is a commodity that affects the self more deeply than mere appearance. The facial mask of Botox allows the consumer to "see or be seen without being seen," which forestalls the possibility of genuine social encounter. If one has artificially paralyzed one's face, one can then control one's reactions and emotions, and spontaneity would be avoided. As one becomes more distanced from undesirable events, one in turn becomes more distanced from others. This foreshortened ability to engage in social relations is particularly damaging if we consider the self to be fundamentally what Burkitt calls a social self. In Burkitt's words, "To have a self is to be able to orient oneself in the social world; to be recognized by others and to be called to account for your actions, having the capacity to reciprocate" (193). I argue that Rankine subscribes to this notion of the social self, and the Botox example indicates the importance of the social dimension within the self. The subject who has

created a face that does not age, that does not wear previous experience, has limited her capacity to be a social self.

Self as Spectator

An important dimension of atomization within consumer culture that *DLMBL* also explores is how mass media provides the crucial structure that allows for a contemporary culture of spectatorship to permeate everyday life. Cultural theorists have linked consumer capitalism to a culture of spectatorship, made possible by mass media, which denies interpersonal interactions. Marxist theorist Guy Debord makes a compelling analysis of social relations in the media age in his 1967 book, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Debord defines the term “spectacle” to refer not only to the product of media technologies or the images they broadcast but to the whole economic and institutional apparatus supporting consumer capitalism; essentially, “spectacle” is the ideology of capitalism transformed into the material world (13, Thesis 4). The society of the spectacle has profound implications for the subject and social relations. Debord argues that, within post-industrial capitalism, “social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy [and that] entails a generalized shift from *having* to *appearing*” (16, Thesis 17). In other words, since the advent of electronic media in the mid-twentieth century, there has been a sea change wherein all aspects of social life have become so thoroughly commodified that social relations are now “mediated by images” (12, Thesis 4). To Debord, the spectacle *negates* life; in his words, “all that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (12, Thesis 1). Furthermore, the economic system of the spectacle relies upon and perpetuates social isolation. All commodities of advanced technology, from television to cars, serve to advance social isolation (22 Thesis 28). “Spectators are linked only by a one-way

relationship” to the spectacle, which only “maintains their isolation from one another” (22 Thesis 29).

Influenced by Debord, postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard also articulates the problem of the consumption of mass media in his 1972 essay, “Requiem for the Media.” In this essay, Baudrillard argues that the mass media “fabricate non-communication”: “if one agrees to define communication as an exchange, as a reciprocal space of a speech and a response, and thus of a responsibility . . . *they are what always prevents response*” (169-70). In Baudrillard’s analysis, the impotence of spectatorship is described in terms of the spectators’ inability to respond or otherwise engage in an exchange of speech and, therefore, spectators lack power; mass media has power to give, but spectators can only receive (170). Accordingly, Baudrillard argues “we live in the era of non-response—of irresponsibility” (170). Debord and Baudrillard’s work originates from an overtly Marxist framework that Rankine does not share, and so their proposed solutions (such as Debord’s resumption of revolutionary class struggle) are not particularly relevant to Rankine’s work. However, their analyses of social problems within the media age are still relevant to some of the issues that Rankine addresses in the dawn of a new century, including the commodification of social relations, the irresponsibility of spectatorship, and the crushing isolation of individuals within consumer capitalism.

Rankine focuses on spectatorship as a pervasive activity in consumer capitalism by positioning the speaking subject early in the text as a regular consumer of electronic media and representing textually an environment shaped by this media—in particular, television. In its concentration on television consumption, *DLMBL* follows David Foster Wallace’s recommendation in his 1990 essay, “*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*,” in which he argues that contemporary writers must include television and other pop cultural references

because it is simply realistic; American writers who were born post-WWII grew up in an environment in which television was always on. Furthermore, Wallace warns, “the most dangerous thing about television for U.S. fiction writers is that we yield to the temptation not to take television seriously as both a disseminator and a definer of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process” (155). Although Wallace was treating the topic of fiction, Wallace’s argument can apply to Rankine’s writing as well. In its examination of American culture, *DLMBL* takes television seriously, including representations of its prevalence. Television and its contents are depicted visually or referenced verbally throughout *DLMBL*, reflecting the omnipresence of television watching in contemporary American culture. The text frames its speaking subject as one who actively participates in media consumption, for the frequent and nuanced references to television shows, film, advertising campaigns, and current events in the main text and footnotes indicate an extensive knowledge of popular culture. Television consumption and the speaking subject’s coming of age are depicted as coterminous: as long as a self has been, there has been TV. From the first page of written text, the speaking subject alludes to television as something that has always been part of her memory since childhood, shaping her ideas about mortality and the human condition (5). As an adult, the speaking subject is depicted as immersed in television viewing, often compulsively: “I leave the television on all the time” (15). Moreover, this immersion in television watching is presented as the default cultural condition that everyone continually engages, as signaled by the indefinite “you”: “You are, as usual, watching television . . .” (7). The pervasiveness of television watching as an activity is also depicted through graphic images: illustrations of television sets are shown throughout the text, either portraying static or displaying stills from broadcast television, films, or commercials. The visual text sets up a reading experience that approximates channel surfing, thus representing

the commonplace condition of perception in the contemporary age: our experience of the world is as mediated increasingly through screens.

Rankine argues that spectatorship is such an insidious cultural practice because it promotes indifference towards suffering. At the outset of *DLMBL*, Rankine inveighs against spectatorship in an epigraph in which she quotes Caribbean poet and political activist Aime Césaire: “And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of grief is not a proscenium, a man who wails is not a dancing bear . . .” (n.p.).⁴⁹ Rankine’s citation of Césaire is notable for several reasons. Through the use of theatrical metaphors, Césaire argues that spectatorship discourages social relations. The “attitude of the spectator” reduces the reality and gravity of suffering in “life” to a “spectacle” for the entertainment of others. When one inhabits the role of the spectator, others are seen as objects: a “sea of grief” is reduced to a “proscenium” for the staging of a spectacle; a “man who wails” is gawked at like “a dancing bear.” Césaire’s quote acknowledges that spectatorship is itself a role, an “attitude” or that can be assumed, “even in thought.” Spectatorship is also presented as a temptation, a condition that Césaire cautions the reader to “beware” of sliding into. By opening the text with Césaire’s caution, Rankine urges readers to re-evaluate the cruelty and indifference of our everyday spectator position.

DLMBL seeks to denaturalize the spectatorship engendered by the permeation of television in contemporary American life. The pervasiveness of television in *DLMBL* emphasizes that the contemporary American habitually occupies the spectator in daily life, which only increases the temptation of spectatorship. Furthermore, the quotidian nature of television watching naturalizes

⁴⁹ Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939) was one of the founding poetic texts of Negritude. Negritude was a literary and ideological movement led by French-speaking black writers and intellectuals in the African diaspora. The movement demanded freedom for lands colonized by European powers and sought recognition for African cultural values (Kesteloot 169).

the cruelty of the consumption of human suffering. Cultural critic Mark Miller links spectatorship to television viewing; Miller refers to television's "need to keep us half-engrossed" which "has produced a spectacle of easy cruelty" (224). Not only are there so many destructive images, but this constant stream of violence "also implies, appeals to, and is protected by a cruelty more refined: the cold thrill of feeling ourselves exalted above all concern, all earnestness, all principle, evolved beyond all innocence or credulity, liberated finally out of naïve moralisms and into pure modernity. We all know that we see through it all, and therefore can watch it as if not fascinated by it" (224, 225). Images of violence and human suffering so permeate the airwaves we as spectators have, as Miller argues, grown indifferent. Electronic media invite us as spectators to treat fellow humans as objects of spectacle, to detach ourselves from them. In resistance to this indifference, several of the televised images included in *DLMBL* are of black men, including James Byrd, Jr., Abner Louima, and Amadou Diallo, who are victims of racial violence perpetrated by white supremacists or police officers. They are suffering humans that Césaire cautions against treating as mere spectacle. The text displays their televised images, and thoughtfully comments on their suffering, in order to denaturalize their cultural status as objects of spectacle.

DLMBL also focuses on how television spectatorship prevents the possibility of social relations, perpetuating isolation as a commonplace cultural condition. Césaire's quote acknowledges that the attitude of the spectator is "sterile" because it produces social isolation. The role of the spectator enables and encourages social isolation, for one watches others but does not engage with them; in Baudrillard's terms, one is prevented from having or exercising the ability to respond. Debord comments on the vicious cycle of commodity consumption and isolation: "The reigning economic system is founded on isolation; at the same time it is a circular

process designed to produce isolation. Isolation underpins technology, and technology isolates in its turn” (22, Thesis 28). In other words, when one watches a lot of TV, one gets lonely; when one gets lonely, one watches more TV. Wallace also describes the vicious cycle of television watching and loneliness: “the more time spent watching TV, the less time spent in the real human world, and the less time spent in the real human world, the harder it becomes not to feel alienated from real humans, solipsistic, lonely” (163). Social isolation begets television watching, which only begets further isolation and loneliness. *DLMBL* can be read as an extended meditation on the kind of vicious cycle of spectatorship and social isolation that Wallace outlines. The isolation and loneliness diagnosed by Rankine and previous cultural critics serve to perpetuate possessive individualism.

DLMBL further demonstrates how American consumer capitalism enables a culture of spectatorship. The text observes how the concept of consumer choice both relies upon and promotes the American value of freedom but ultimately perpetuates the practice of passive spectatorship and furthers social atomization. The speaking subject reflexively comments on her participation in the process of selecting which material to consume and which to avoid. After discussing her sadness upon the news of James Byrd Jr.’s violent murder, the speaking subject states, “I don’t know, I just find when the news comes on I switch the channel” (23). However, this action indicates the emptiness of channel surfing, an activity involving a series of choices that resolve nothing. Miller describes the empty promise of “choice” on television as a contemporary version of American frontier fantasy of freedom: “TV’s nightly promise is something like the grand old promise of America herself. . . . Here all enjoy the promise of that very opportunity, that very differentiation which they, and this great land mass, represent: the promise of unending *choice*” (Miller 184, 185). Similarly, Rankine argues that channel surfing

and channel programming are consumer choices that encourage the American fantasy of self-creation and freedom: “You can program your favorite channels. Don’t like the world you live in, choose one closer to the world you live in. . . . This is what is great about America. Anyone can make these kinds of choices” (24). With its deadpan tone, the text ironically comments on Americans’ love affair with consumer choice that is in fact based on the illusion of choice. What is “great” about America is how consumer capitalism gives everyone the equal opportunity to remain passive spectators; in Miller’s words, TV “celebrates unending ‘choice’” but “the only purpose of that spectacle is to promote the habit of spectatorship” (228). Rankine emphasizes how spectators, as consumers, ignore and ultimately deny undesirable elements of the larger world, an activity that can only further social atomization. The “world” that the consumer “chooses,” which can be “closer to the world you live in” indicates how media consumption allows spectators to continue to cocoon themselves in an environment fabricated through mediated images. Spectatorship is presented as deeply problematic, but equally insidious is the activity of turning away. “Choice” through media consumption stands in as an activity that rests on and seemingly promotes the cherished American ideal of freedom, but the concept consumer of choice actually serves individuals’ desires to block out undesirable social realities while sustaining our position as passive spectators.

Mass Media Culture and Living Death

DLMBL portrays television watching as a liminal activity that approximates a kind of living death, engaged in by those with terminal illness, insomnia, depression, or suicidal tendencies. When visiting a friend dying of breast cancer, the speaker states, “We watch a lot of television the four days I sit at her bedside” (9). Another friend develops Alzheimer’s, and he desperately points to the television attempting to communicate that he wants to “see the lady who deals in

death,” which turns out to be the television show *Murder, She Wrote* (18). Yet another friend is having “the depression of his life”; he is unwilling or unable to engage in meaningful communication, but he is willing to sit next to his friend and silently watch a DVD (42). In these examples, television is portrayed as a liminal space occupied by those who are not fully alive: they occupy a borderland between death and life, unable to fully engage or communicate with another. In another episode, the speaking subject presents herself as watching television out of insomnia: “In the night I watch television to help me fall asleep, or I watch television because I cannot sleep. . . . Eventually it is all a blur” (29). In the isolated suffering of sleeplessness, television is sought out as a cure, although the experience becomes blurred, unknowable. The text further comments on how late night television watching is the provenance of the depressed, and pharmaceutical companies take advantage of that fact by marketing antidepressants. The text portrays a commercial for the antidepressant PAXIL, and the text contains a graphic image of a television featuring a still of the commercial. Across the screen reads, “YOUR LIFE IS WAITING.” The speaker says, “I wonder, for what, for what does it wait? For life I guess” (29). In this example, late night television is a kind of netherworld, holding the place of life instead of constituting actual life. Another episode recounts an indefinite “you” who is watching television, “as usual,” when a suicide prevention hotline flashes on the screen; “you” call the hotline and tell the man on the other end, “I feel like I am already dead. . . . you add, I am in death’s position” (7). The position of the television spectator is one who is “already dead,” occupying “death’s position.” In these examples, television is sought after a refuge, but it really is a kind of limbo, where those who are isolated and suffering resort to a living death.

While excessive television consumption is likened to a kind of living death, *DLMBL* discusses Princess Diana’s funeral to underscore our cultural denial of—and ambiguity about—

mortality. This discussion argues for the spectators' sense of false intimacy with the princess and displaced grief for their own mortality. In her lifetime, Princess Diana had been transformed into an object of media surveillance and spectacle that observers could view from their own unobserved locations. As Wallace observes, such a one-way relationship is seductive and comforting, for television viewers can feel in control of the relation with the people onscreen. Spectators not have to bear the emotional costs of a scary, awkward, or difficult human interaction (152). The death of Princess Diana indicated the end to the parasocial relationships that spectators had with her. Her funeral became a global spectacle, for, as *DLMBL* notes, television brought the rest of the world the images of an English population grieving the loss of their princess; the text displays a visual image of a still from the public mourning on an illustration of a television set (39). Rankine questions what kind of relation those mourners had to the princess, whom they only knew through the media: "Was Princess Diana ever really alive? I mean, alive to anyone outside of her friends and family—truly?" (39). Rankine argues that the British mourners at her funeral projected themselves and their own emotions on the object called Princess Diana: "Weren't they mourning the protection they felt she should have had? A protection they'll never have? Weren't they simply grieving the random inevitability of their own deaths?" (39). The grief that Rankine specifies is particularly difficult for Westerners in the contemporary age because of the entrenched belief in the concept of inviolable selfhood. To Rankine, the mass, public displays of mourning for Diana's death enact the dissonance between the denial of death and its reality. The shock of her death correlates with wealth and privilege; the most privileged of us should be able to retreat safely within our gated communities and survive, but Princess Diana, in fact, did not. The text's discussion of Princess Diana illustrates the epistemological confusion about "real" social connections, life, and death in our media-

saturated age, while connecting the grief over her death as the recognition of the loss of inviolable subjectivity.

Spectatorial Sterility

While Princess Diana's death is an example of an over-estimation of the social ties between spectators and celebrities, *DLMBL* also reveals how another norm of media consumption is the passive intake of images and events which position the viewer in "the sterile attitude of the spectator," unable to effect change or respond meaningfully to human suffering. Rankine provides an example of consumption of news media in order to explore the experience of the subject as passive consumer of mediated images of current events. The speaking subject, the "I," reads the news in the *New York Times* that South African President Mbeki finally allowed antiretrovirals to be accessible to HIV positive South Africans. The news story addressed the political obstruction of Mbeki and previous lawsuits filed by thirty-nine pharmaceutical companies to prevent development of generic versions of the drugs.⁵⁰ The news coverage leads the speaker to generalize about the paralyzing despair experienced by media consumption (with an italicized quotation from *King Lear*): "It is not possible to communicate how useless, how much like a skin-sack of uselessness I felt. *I am better than thou art now: I am a fool, the fool said, thou art nothing.* Is she dead? Is he dead? Yes, they are dead. One observes, one recognizes without being recognized. One opens the paper. One turns on the television. Nothing changes. My distress grows into nothing. Thou art nothing" (117). In Baudrillard's terms, the speaking subject in this passage is prevented from response, and therefore she feels useless, stymied.

⁵⁰ Rankine lists the thirty-nine pharmaceutical companies by listing them on the previous pages (115-16). In the footnotes, she explains that they are "Pharmaceutical applicants against the government of South Africa: Case Number 4183/98" (152). Rankine further emphasizes their names by setting them forth in bold and capitalized letters. She lists them prior to explaining that their lawsuit "to prevent South Africa's manufacture of generic AIDS drugs" blocked life-saving drugs from being available to five million HIV positive South Africans. The spare presentation of the list—which includes such familiar names as Merck, Eli Lilly, and Bayer—is an example of documentary evidence that Rankine finds important for readers to bear witness.

Rankine uses a bodily metaphor, “skin-sack,” to convey her feelings of “uselessness.” In a media story about the death or survival of the bodies of those infected by HIV, Rankine emphasizes how spectators are reduced to inert bodies and their concerns are reduced to nothingness. This example illustrates how media consumption leads to the experience of sterility: one can observe, but cannot act; one can feel stress, but that energy often becomes “nothing.”

In this section, Rankine also explores how spectatorship limits one’s ability to engage in social relations. As in the section on Botox, where “I can see or be seen without being seen,” when consuming the news, “One observes, one recognizes without being recognized” (104, 117). If Botox is a commodity that delivers facial paralysis, then the text likens media consumption to the spectator’s ongoing, daily paralysis. The crippling feelings of “uselessness” enable the television watcher to be lulled into a state where response and responsibility are denied and those observed on a screen are reduced to objects of spectacle. The condition of spectatorship, one in which we all participate, has become entirely naturalized in contemporary culture. *DLMBL*, however, aims to defamiliarize the everyday occurrence of spectatorship and despair and to outline the implications of the kind of non-relations in which Americans participate on a daily basis.

In addition to the examination of the general, sterile condition of media spectatorship, Rankine explores how individuals avoid encounters while they are in the physical presence of others, thus perpetuating the condition of loneliness invoked in the text’s title. The speaking subject self-reflexively acknowledges that she routinely avoids encounters in “real life”:

In my dream I apologize to everyone I meet. Instead of introducing myself, I apologize for not knowing why I am alive. In real life, oddly enough, when I am fully awake and out and about, if I catch someone’s eye, I quickly look away. . . .

In real life the looking away is the apology, despite the fact that when I look away I almost always feel guilty. . . I feel as if I have created a reason to apologize, I feel the guilt of having ignored that thing—the encounter. I could have nodded, I could have smiled without showing my teeth. In some small way I could have wordlessly said, I see you seeing me and I apologize for not knowing why I am alive. (98)

In previous passages, the text has established the naturalization of spectatorship as a default condition in daily life. In this passage, Rankine comments on the dynamics of encounter in the presence of another—or, more precisely, avoided encounter. In this passage, the speaker presents an everyday scenario—walking “out and about” and avoiding eye contact with others. Wallace argues that television viewing habituates all of us to these kinds of avoided encounters: “The well-trained lonely viewer[’s] ... exhaustive TV-training in how to worry about how he might come across, seem to other eyes, makes riskily genuine human encounters seem even scarier” (180). Unable to direct the occurrence with a remote control, view it from a screen, or hide behind a mask, the speaker tries to avoid being seen, for to be seen brings on feelings of guilt, shame, and fear.

Rankine’s description of the avoided encounter resonates with Jean-Paul Sartre’s account of “the Look” in *Being and Nothingness*. While Sartre’s Existentialist philosophy is currently unpopular and generally criticized for having the kind of individualistic worldview that Rankine expressly opposes, Sartre’s account of “the Look” can be used to articulate the avoided encounter of *DLMBL* to illuminate how interpersonal interactions are often reduced to hostility,

distrust, and shame.⁵¹ However, while Sartre universalizes such hostile relations as intrinsic to the human condition, I suggest that his paradigm of intersubjective behavior aptly describes the toxic culture of possessive individualism and solipsistic spectatorship described in *DLMBL*.

Sartre argues that the solitary individual, in a non-reflective mode of being, is solipsistic. As long as one can see and not be seen, then one lacks consciousness and assumes the self to be the center of the universe. Moreover, Sartre argues, one does not feel shame or guilt when alone (222). However, the presence of the Other disrupts this position. When one is seen by an Other, the look brings the self to consciousness. This consciousness is inherently uncomfortable, for when the Other appears, “I” am thrust out of solipsism and “put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other” (222). As a result, the self’s fantasy of control evaporates. Moreover, for Sartre, interpersonal relations are depicted in hostile terms. He presents two examples to illustrate the anxiety-producing effects of “the Look.” The first example is of a soldier crawling through the brush, wary of attack: “The look which the eyes manifest, no matter what kind of eyes they are is a pure reference to myself. What I apprehend immediately . . . is that I am vulnerable, that I have a body which can be hurt, that I occupy a place and that I can not in any case escape from the space in which I am without defense—in short, that *I am seen*” (259). In this passage, encounter means vulnerability to exposure and violence. In his rhetoric, Sartre builds up to the simple fact of being seen (“*I am seen*”) as a horrifying climax to a disastrous turn of events. In his second example, Sartre depicts a man peeping through a keyhole when another comes along the hallway and catches him in his voyeuristic act. Prior to “the Look,” the voyeur at the keyhole is able to see and not be seen, and, consequently, feels no shame or guilt. Upon being discovered, the voyeur knows he is judged,

⁵¹ Steven Earnshaw points out that Existentialism, with its preoccupation with freedom and individual choice, is generally perceived as “anti-social,” in contrast with the “current critical and philosophical drive towards founding a communitarian ethic” (169).

and he feels shame. Sartre universalizes the example of the voyeur by arguing that shame reveals that our existence is not as the center of the universe but that we exist as an object of the Other's look: "Now, shame . . . is shame of *self*; it is the *recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging" (261). For Sartre, encounters with others bring about consciousness of one's existence, but the reality of that existence as fundamentally out of one's control disrupts the comforts of solipsism and voyeurism.

One can read *DLMBL* as articulating, and critiquing, a vision of post-9/11 American life as an Existential nightmare. Accustomed to the passive comforts of spectatorship through electronic media—itself a kind of peeping at the keyhole—the speaking subject of *DLMBL* avoids the active engagement of encounter. In Rankine's text, the individual consumer/spectator is accustomed to routine voyeurism via television—seeing, but not being seen. When the "I," in the physical presence of another, runs into the possibility of being seen, the automatic response is to "quickly look away" in order to avoid recognizing that "I see you seeing me." Upon encountering another, a consciousness of the self's existence surfaces ("I am alive"), but it is immediately accompanied by confusion ("I don't know why I am alive") and shame ("I need to apologize because I don't know why I am alive"). The speaker attempts to hide, to avoid confusion and shame, but this attempt brings on feelings of guilt for ignoring "the encounter." The spectator/consumer "I" prevents the possibility of encounter, feels ashamed, and the cycle of spectatorship and loneliness continues. Ultimately, it is this very Existential nightmare—characterized by solipsism, sterile spectatorship, and the avoidance of encounter—that the text of *DLMBL* aims to resist.

The Fragmented “I”

Up to this point, I have focused on how *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* frames the cultural problems that both contribute to and result from entrenched beliefs in coherent subjectivity. I will now shift to the writing and reading strategies that Rankine advances to address these problems. If we isolate ourselves in the hermetic world of televised non-reality and chance encounters with others lead us to feel trapped in an Existential nightmare, how can we work to find meaningful interpersonal relations with fellow members of our local and global communities? If consumption of commodities and electronic media reduces the self to the “sterile attitude of the spectator,” what kind of ethical practices can counter this reduction of the self to spectatorship? In my poethical reading of *DLMBL*, I contend that the text illustrates how reading and writing certain kinds of poetic texts produce a model of relational subjectivity that invites ethical engagement.

How can a writer use the first person singular ethically in a twenty-first century text? How does *DLMBL* deploy the pronoun “I,” which looks unified, coherent, and inviolable, while conveying that the “I” is part of larger social context? A return to Rankine’s essay “The First Person in the Twenty-First Century” sheds light on how language and subjectivity operates in the text of *DLMBL*. In “The First Person,” Rankine argues for strategies of fragmentation to convey a representation of subjectivity that is fractured and therefore realistic. As stated earlier in this chapter, Rankine insists that the “I” must be grounded in a social context. However, the grounds of social context are unstable, for the “I” is continually “broken into”: “we are always being broken into (visually and invisibly) by history, memory, current events, the phone, e-mail, a kiss, calls of nature, whatever” (132). Rankine’s list of disruptions positions fragmented subjectivity as a concept that is both proved by and immediately relatable to everyday experience. This list

also indicates the writing strategy of disruption as it relates to both content and form. In reference to the self as interrupted by “history, memory, current events, the phone, e-mail,” Rankine places the concept of fragmented subjectivity in terms of an individual’s daily life in contemporary culture. The interruptions Rankine catalogues demonstrate that the social contexts that both ground and fragment the self are large and small, historic and quotidian, hi-tech and corporeal. As a result, textual content includes both larger, historical phenomena and the minor ephemera of everyday life.

Formally, in order to convey the instability of subject within a text, strategies of fragmentation are used, such as “ruptured syntax” and “irruption, interruptions, and discontinuities” (133, 134). Rankine avows that she uses strategies of fragmentation in her own work and implies that fragmentation most realistically conveys the self’s existence through time: “In time, the path of the first person crosses borders, strays, pauses, and repeats to cross borders, stray, pause, or repeat. The ruptured syntax and the fragmented text are used to suggest, and perhaps reflect, the process by which existence (being in time) is enacted” (134). In contrast to representations of sovereign or stable subjectivity, linguistic rupture and repetition are necessary to illustrate the self as dynamic through time. Furthermore, for Rankine, the use of textual fragmentation and reflexivity in the exploration of subjectivity does important ethical work: “The writer’s attempt to insert into, redirect, juxtapose, or interrupt the first person, demonstrates a desire to write with awareness and integrity within the knowledge afforded us in the twenty-first century” (133). For Rankine, formal recognition of the incoherent, unstable, and relational nature of the individual is essential for writers who aim to ground their work in an ethics aware of contemporary, poststructuralist intellectual discourse.

Indeed, *DLMBL* uses textual interruption, repetition and juxtaposition to resist the sovereignty of the conventional lyric “I,” instead portraying the first person subject as “broken into” by multiple cultural and personal discourses. The speaking subject acknowledges how thoughts running through her mind originate from the speech of others, both from personal and public sources. One place where the text uses the strategies of interruption and repetition occurs towards the beginning *DLMBL*, where the speaking subject refers a slate board with a message on it that was scrawled by a friend who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s: “This is the most miserable in my life” (17). A visual image of the slate board with the scrawled writing is included, and is then repeated on the same page. The speaker discusses the thoughts running through her head: “One day I hear, as if he is standing next to me, the poet Joseph Brodsky saying, *What’s the point of forgetting if it’s followed by dying?*” (17). Brodsky’s voice keeps “entering the room every time I look up” and the two phrases keep repeating and alternating: “this is the most miserable in my life *what’s the point of forgetting if it’s followed by dying* this is the most miserable in my life *what’s the point . . .* I can’t stop people from saying what they need to say. I don’t know how to stop repetitions like these” (17). Rankine uses interruption and the repetition of the visual and verbal texts to represent how the subject’s thought process is incoherent and “broken into” by other discourses.

In another example of interruption, the subject discusses how she was “broken into” by an e-mail that she received shortly after 9/11: “Walking home I find myself singing softly to the tune of “Day-O,” *Come Mister Taliban give us bin Laden*. This version of the song along with its accompanying animation was passed on to me via e-mail and now I can’t stop myself” (85). Following this commentary, the text includes a visual image of the e-mail’s caricatures of George W. Bush and Colin Powell. The e-mail’s visual and musical parody enters the speaking

subject's consciousness, thereby becoming part of her internal dialogue. The email, despite its tone of jocularity and playful refrain, is all about a bid for power on a geopolitical scale, and it ultimately espouses a militaristic worldview. Ultimately, in resistance to the email's assertions of power, the speaking subject lacks sovereignty. The "I" "can't stop" singing "Day-O," "can't stop people from saying what they need to say," "can't stop repetitions like these." The textual interruptions, repetitions, and juxtapositions produce a first person "I" who is very different from the lyric "I" who is "master" or "captain" of the soul; they construct a fragmented "I" who is continually pervaded by external discourses.

Furthermore, *DLMBL* uses interruption and repetition in order to resist the convention of the "expressive" lyric "I" and to replace it with a first-person subject as "broken into" by discourses that originate from elsewhere. An example of this interruption happens in a passage that I mentioned earlier in this chapter, when the speaking subject has an emotional outburst upon watching a television news account about then-president elect George W. Bush's imperfect memory of the grisly murder of James Byrd, Jr. After mentioning both Bush's problematic presidential win and his flawed recall of the criminal case, the text follows with the comment: "*You don't remember because you don't care*. Sometimes my mother's voice swells and fills my forehead. Mostly I resist the flooding, but in Bush's case I find myself talking to the television screen: *You don't know because you don't care*" (21). Here we see a hysterical emotional response muted and distanced from the poet— rather than representing the repeated italicized words of outrage as the poet's unique emotional response, the speaking subject attributes it to her mother's voice, which she struggles to resist. On the next page, she comments on her own emotionality: "Then, like all things impassioned, this voice takes on a life of its own: *You don't know because you don't bloody care. Do you?*" (22). While the "voice" may come to life, it is

distanced from the writer. The text does not depict a writer “finding” or “expressing” her voice in the vein of the twentieth-century “voice poem.” Instead, while experiencing a strong emotion, the speaker says (shouts? hears in her head?) a variation of her mother’s sentiments. In contrast with the conventions of “expressive” poetry, the writer is not presented as owning or even originating the words or their tone. Instead of a direct progression from provocation to response, there is a dialectic process of emotional flooding and restraint, the articulation of another’s words and a self-conscious reflection on those words. The speaking subject’s thoughts are presented as porous, emerging from a process whereby an internal voice is constituted through ongoing dialogues with other voices. Thus *DLMBL* reveals the subject’s interiority, but it is one over which no unified “I” exerts total control.

The Scripted “I”: The First-Person Social

In addition to fragmentation and interruption of the lyric “I,” Rankine argues for the necessity of textual reflexivity in order to refute commonplace beliefs in coherent subjectivity. In the essay “The First Person in the Twenty-First Century,” Rankine maintains the presence of the “I” in her writing, but she argues that she does so only while signaling an awareness of what she believes is the illusory and unstable nature of the first person: “As fictionalized as the space of poetry and prose can be, I still feel that the construction of a self must demonstrate a consciousness of its scriptedness” (134). Rankine argues that reflexivity indicates a textual awareness of the incommensurability of the “language self” and the physical person behind it: “In truth, no one exists behind the language self” (134). The coherent “I” is a textual construction, one that is entirely fictional. Rankine thus insists on the poststructuralist stance that “no one exists behind” the lyric “I” in order to dismantle the entrenched belief in a coherent subject that is perpetuated by conventional use of the first person in written texts. Reflexivity,

which signals the position of the “I” as a self only existing in language, is necessary to challenge conventional depictions of coherent subjectivity and, consequently, the commonplace myth of autonomy.

Furthermore, Rankine insists that the first person also bears a social responsibility: “Most of us have been around enough to know that the ‘I’ ultimately has a responsibility to the intelligence (think humanity) of the ‘you.’ Some might say that recognition of responsibility on the page is what makes use of the first-person social” (132). Reflexivity, in Rankine’s work, is tied to ethical concepts of responsibility and sociality. The demonstrated awareness of the self’s scriptedness transforms the first person singular into a “first-person social” by demonstrating the responsibility of the writing “I” towards the reading “you.” I suggest that Rankine’s poetics resonate with Blasing’s conceptualization of lyric as rhetoric and the lyric “I” as an “ethical figure of the intending speaker” (35). Rankine, as postlanguage lyric poet, demonstrates Blasing’s model of the lyric “I” as an ethical figure by insisting on the speaking subject’s reflexivity. In order to sustain credibility with readers, who are also aware of the interventions of poststructuralism and Language writing, the postlanguage lyric poet must demonstrate an awareness that the lyric “I” is a subject who exists only in language.

DLMBL signals a recognition of the writing self’s scriptedness in order to distance the text from the uncritical deployment of the first person singular and move towards a textual “first-person social.” Two elements of a self-conscious “I”—recognition of both its scriptedness and its social responsibility—are articulated in direct comments on the relation between the writer and the presence of the “I” in an episode concerning a conversation between the writer and her editor. The editor asks the speaker to expand on her personal take on the topic of her article,

which is liver failure (54). The speaking subject ponders this comment and extends it to broader questions about the first person subject in writing:

I understand that what she wants is an explanation of the mysterious connections that exist between an author and her text. If I am present in a subject position what responsibility do I have to the content, to the truth value, of the words themselves? Is 'I' even me or am 'I' a gear-shift to get from one sentence to the next? Should I say we? Is the voice not various if I take responsibility for it? What does my subject mean to me? (54)

This passage demonstrates a consciousness of scriptedness of the "I" by posing a series of rhetorical questions that ultimately position the "I" on the page as serving both grammatical and social functions. The description of the "I" as a "gear-shift" between sentences highlights the "I" as a grammatical function, one that Blasing theorizes similarly: "Grammatically, the 'I' is a shifter; empty of lexical value, it indicates that discourse is taking place" (29). In keeping with Blasing's analysis, however, the speaker recognizes that the lyric "I" carries significance beyond its grammatical function. The questions imply that "I" cannot be identical to the self of the author, that "no one exists behind the languaged self," but mysterious connections between the author and text remain. This passage thus reflexively acknowledges the "I" as a pronoun with a shifting referent while at the same time foregrounding the matter of authorial responsibility, which is referred to twice. The "I" on the page may not be identical with the living author, but the text still acknowledges that the author has an ethical obligation to her readers. The speaking subject recognizes a "responsibility on the page" to the "content" of the text, and this responsibility implicitly extends to the "you," the reader of the text.

Furthermore, Rankine also raises the question of whether or not “we” would be more accurate to use than “I,” for “we” can invoke the self as “various”; in other words, the self emerges from part of what Charles Taylor calls larger “webs of interlocution” (qtd. in Parker 10). Significantly, Rankine poses these issues in a series of questions; while building towards an argument, the question marks point to a lack of ultimate resolution. Although the mystery of the connections between author and text is not resolved, the reflexivity of *DLMBL* signals a recognition of the writing self’s scriptedness *and* responsibility.

Further destabilizing the conventions of the lyric “I,” the author’s consciousness of the scriptedness of the textual self is evident through interchangeable pronoun usage. At times in *DLMBL*, the “I” slides into other pronouns such as “we” and “one” or “you.” For example, upon reading a newspaper account of a thirteen-year-old African-American boy, Lionel Tate, who was convicted of the murder of a six-year-old girl and tried as an adult, the text states “I, or we, it hardly matters, seek out the story in the *Times*” (67). After explaining further details of the case, the text alternates between “we” and “I.” There is an initial comment on the collective consumption of the media account of the Tate case: “In this moment we are alone with the facts” (67). This observation is then followed by an individual act of perception and reaction: “I see the tears have run relatively parallel down his mother’s cheeks. What I have is a headache” (67). The pronominal switch from “I” to “we” and the disclaimer that the singularity or plurality of the first person “hardly matters” distances the text from the commonplace assumptions that accompany the conventional use of the “I” as a record of singular, autobiographically based experience. The pronominal interchange further emphasizes how consumption of news media is an experience that exists in both individual and collective registers, thus positioning the self as always within a larger culture. The conventional use of “I” cannot adequately address the individual and

collective nature of the experience of mass cultural representations of events. The recognition of the scriptedness of the self in the discussion of the Lionel Tate case defamiliarizes the “I” and articulates the mass cultural consumption that is experienced through the first person singular *and* first person plural.

The Death of the “I”

In addition to Rankine’s discussion of the Lionel Tate case, pronominal interchangeability surfaces frequently in *DLMBL*. I suggest that Rankine links the technique of pronominal interchangeability to one of the text’s major themes, namely, the ambiguous borderline between life and death. *DLMBL* carries on an extended use of pronominal interchangeability to link the theme of living death to both the loss of the coherent textual first-person subject and, with it, textual content as verifiable truth claim. While the opening sequence of *DLMBL* begins with a first person narrator, the third episode in this sequence signals a remove from the “I,” for it includes a second person narrative about an individual’s call to a suicide hotline. The passage begins with general statements, using “one” or “you” in place of “I”: “Or one begins asking oneself that same question differently. Am I dead? You are, as usual, watching television . . . when a number flashes on the screen: 1-800-SUICIDE. You dial the number. Do you feel like killing yourself? The man on the other end of the receiver asks. You tell him, I feel like I am already dead . . . I am in death’s position” (7). This episode seems to have the intimate details of a confessional narrative, yet the text establishes a distance from the person of the writer with the use of “you” as a general pronoun, flattening any sense of conventional individuality. During the telephone conversation, “you” and “I” become indistinguishable. The text signals that, although an “I” is invoked, it is subjected to a kind of death: unstable, unmoored from any direct referent, “in death’s position.” The shift from the “I” to general pronouns subvert the

expectation for life writing as truth claim; the point is not whether or not the author made a call to the suicide hotline in real life. The use of “you” to indicate a general pronoun instead points to commonplace experiences such as habitual television consumption (“You are, as usual, watching television”) and the contemplation of suicide and death (“This kind of thing happens, perhaps is still happening”) (7). Furthermore, in this episode, the suicide attempt is as ambiguous as the pronouns are: the “suicide hotline is called,” in the passive voice, but the “you/I” protagonist never claims to attempt suicide. Through the use of interchangeable pronouns, the text refuses the conventions of either confessional poetry or prose life writing by sidestepping questions of the author’s verifiable life experience.

The episode with the suicide hotline caller also explores inadequacy of American language and social ideals—particularly, the pursuit of happiness—to describe the idea of the self in flux. As a result of the suicide hotline call, the paramedics come to the door, and the second-person speaker attempts to explain the situation: “You explain to the ambulance attendant that you had a momentary lapse of happily. The noun, happiness, is a static state of some Platonic ideal you know better than to pursue. Your modifying process had happily or unhappily experienced a momentary pause” (7). Rankine argues that the rhetorical articulation of one of Americans’ most cherished values, the pursuit of happiness, is flawed, for its goal is the self’s possession of a static condition, as linguistically articulated in an abstract noun. Instead, Rankine counters with “happily,” an adverbial, and thus “modifying,” concept.⁵² Rather than happiness as a condition to “pursue” and thus possess, the self undergoes a “modifying process,” that is, a process of almost continual flux. The emphasis on the self as undergoing a “modifying process” implicitly opposes Platonic, static forms with an embrace of the Aristotelian notion of happiness as ethical activity—that is, “a certain sort of activity of soul in accord with virtue” (Aristotle

⁵² The endnotes also reference poet Lyn Hejinian’s 2000 book, *Happily*, which explores the topic of happiness.

18).⁵³ Thus, the self in flux is identified with “happily,” ethical action and vitality; in contrast, the self in stasis, in the form of a “momentary pause,” is linked to isolation, passive consumption, and “death’s position.” The “momentary lapse of happily” not only violates grammatical orthodoxy and, thus, immediate intelligibility, but is also met with social conventions and practices that insist upon stasis. The authoritative figures in this episode do not recognize this “momentary” loss of “happily.” The man on the hotline says, “Don’t believe what you are thinking and feeling”; the paramedic invokes the law: “you need to come quietly . . . Any resistance will only make matters worse. By law, I will have to restrain you” (7). Thus, within social structures, claims of flux are met with opposition and restraint by authorities; the subject must be complicit in its limitations, or she will be shackled. In this example, Rankine counters the static subject of possessive individualism with the concept of the self in flux. If, culturally, we all have been conditioned by the “American fantasy” of survival (25), the text seeks to dismantle that fantasy while at the same time observing American language and culture continually insists upon the static subject.

DLMBL includes many other examples of death, dying, and experiences of dwelling in a suspended state between death and life.⁵⁴ The text’s focus on death both highlights the mortality that American culture continually wishes away, and also paradoxically underscores its investment in how Americans can be more alive through a reconfiguration of the ideas of selfhood and mortality. *DLMBL* asserts that, counter to the entrenched American fantasy of the self as static, immortal, and sovereign, one must confront the reality of disintegration—through

⁵³ Retallack emphasizes the Aristotelian notion of happiness in her discussion of poethics (18).

⁵⁴ Further examples of those occupying an ambiguous area between life and death in *DLMBL* include a fictional sister grieving for the loss of her husband, son, and daughter in a car accident; a friend with breast cancer who has “her personality . . . overshadowed” and “imprinted” by the “condition, her death” (9); and Lionel Tate, a juvenile criminal tried as an adult and sentenced to life in prison: “In the time it takes for the appeal to happen he will be a dead child in a an adult prison. He will be alive as someone else” (67).

death, loss, movement—as a necessary and ethical condition for life. Rankine implicitly makes this argument at the conclusion of the book’s first sequence. After discussing a friend who is dying from breast cancer, the text poses the question, “Why do people waste away?” and concludes with a quote from Gertrude Stein, who, the text notes, “herself died of stomach cancer” (11). The quotation, from Stein’s 1945 book *Wars I Have Seen*, points out how the very existence of the “I” is predicated on death: ““if everybody did not die the earth would be all covered over and I, I as I, could not have come to be and try as much as I can try not to be I, nevertheless, I would mind that so much, as much as anything, so then why not die, and yet and again not a thing, not a thing to be liking, not a thing”” (11). This quote from Stein invokes a logical argument that mortality is necessary condition for one’s existence, for “everybody” must die in order to clear physical space for other inhabitants; otherwise, “the earth would be all covered over.” The use of understatement—as in the observation that one will “mind” the fact of one’s death “so much”—signals that Stein’s statement is also a parody of a logical argument, for how can mortality be reconciled in such facile terms? Upon closer examination, one can read Stein’s repetition, “I, I as I” as producing an insistence that highlights a double meaning for the loss of the “I”: both one’s physical death and the loss of the “I” as the naturalized concept of the individualistic self. The argument points out the attachment to the individualistic “I” is at odds with the recognition of mortality as an ethical condition for life. The recognition of mortality is ethical in the awareness that both the loss of the possessive “I” is necessary to cede space for others, and that others’ mortality was a gift for the “I” to be alive at all. The quote from Stein vacillates between the ethical recognition of mortality and the attachment to the individualistic self: “I” can “try as much as I can try not to be I,” but the loss of the “I” is noted as “not a thing to be liking.” In the Stein passage, the text gestures toward the replacement of the sovereign,

stable “I” of possessive individualism with an ethical self who strives to recognize his or her interdependence with others. In Levinas’s terms, this move is an attempt to concede the necessary relinquishment of “my place in the sun.” It is through the recognition of the self’s limits, including the limitation of mortality, that, paradoxically, the self can extend outward in order to engage in ethical activity and thereby embrace life. A death of the sovereign “I” occurs, which thus makes room for the vitality of a relational self.

Ethical Practice of Media Consumption: From Spectatorship to Witness

While much of *DLMBL* concerns the textual representation of a kind of living death through isolation, spectatorship, consumerism, and the ideology of possessive individualism, I argue that, as a poethical text, it also gestures towards revitalizing experiences that emerge through ethical practices. In her formulation of the poethical, Retallack draws on the Aristotelian “ethos of rising again and again to the occasion of those activities that require strenuous engagement of one’s whole being—intellect, passions, sensual presence, meditative awareness” (18). Retallack emphasizes the ethical as activity, in contrast with passive consumption; furthermore, the “strenuous engagement of one’s whole being” bespeaks a sincerity and seriousness of purpose that is inimical to the ironic detachment of the media-saturated spectator.⁵⁵ While many of the episodes in *DLMBL* I have discussed up to this point illustrate or enact the enervating and isolating effects of media saturation, the qualities that Retallack invokes—endurance, presence, awareness—are incorporated in the text’s movement towards ethical practice. Through these qualities, and the adoption of a stance of sincerity and

⁵⁵ Retallack opposes the poethical to the passive consumption of mass culture: “There’s been a continuum from the popular culture of the early part of the twentieth century to the mass culture of today that has become increasingly fantasy bound, increasingly dependent on the fantasy logics of a consumer-centered me-ethos”; “passivity has been naturalized by our consumer ethos. It’s thought to be natural to want to sleep one’s way through life. I don’t think it’s ‘natural’ at all to scratch only the media-induced itch” (33; 31).

engagement, the text allows for the possibility of moving away from “the sterile attitude of the spectator” and towards the ethical position of the witness.

In my reading, I draw on philosopher Kelly Oliver’s concept of witness. Oliver considers the process of witnessing as the fundamental ability to respond to and address others; accordingly, witnessing “is the basis for all subjectivity” (7). To Oliver, subjectivity, as intrinsically intersubjective, has an inherent responsibility that involves both “response-ability” or “condition of possibility of response” and an “ethical obligation to respond and to enable response-ability from others” (15). The necessary and difficult process of witness—in the double meaning of eyewitness and in the sense of bearing witness to the unseen—enables a richly dialogic subjectivity that fulfills the ethical obligation of “response-ability.”⁵⁶ *DLMBL* takes up the difficult but necessary process of bearing witness in the media age, and in so doing, advances a relational subjectivity that is inherently ethical.

DLMBL offers the possibility of ethical media consumption through the self-conscious interrogation of the speaker’s stance as would-be witness through its rejection of spectatorial detachment. In the episode that cites the speaking subject’s reaction to James Byrd, Jr.’s murder, the text shifts away from Bush and towards the speaking subject’s recognition of her own forgetfulness: “I forget things too. It makes me sad. Or it makes me the saddest. ...the sadness lives in the recognition that a life can not matter. Or, as there are billions of lives, my sadness is alive alongside the recognition that billions of lives never mattered” (23). The responsibility for remembering and recognizing the suffering of James Byrd, Jr. is directed away from Bush and onto the speaking subject. This commentary is an example of an attempt to deploy the “first-

⁵⁶ Oliver develops her theory of witness as the basis of subjectivity by partly building on and partly departing from poststructuralist theorists, in particular Judith Butler, who espouses what she considers neo-Hegelian theories of intersubjectivity based on recognition and visibility. Oliver argues that subjectivity based on “recognition” normalizes antagonistic relations and proposes witness as an ethical alternative.

person social,” for it uses reflexivity to signal to readers the writer’s recognition of her complicated position as potential witness to human suffering. For a writer who aims to engage in the ethical practice of witnessing, the presence of the “I” is vexed: how does a writer use reflexivity to acknowledge her presence as witness without having a self-aggrandizing “I” overpower the human suffering she seeks to bear witness to? While the text self-consciously points out that the “I” does not enact a performance of heightened lamentation—without “breaking my heart, without bursting into anything”—it acknowledges an alternative temptation, which is to remain in the spectator’s position of ironic detachment. By spectatorial irony I am referring to the sense of “postmodern cool,” co-opted and perpetuated by television, which encourages spectators to ridicule others for entertainment and deeply fear ridicule in turn; as a result of “postmodern cool,” spectators avoid “passé expressions of value, emotion, or vulnerability” (Wallace 181).⁵⁷ The speaking subject implicitly invokes spectatorial irony as she questions the cool reserve with which she writes of her sadness at the “recognition that a life can not matter,” which quickly expands into “billions of lives” that “never mattered.” Finally, the “I” self-consciously acknowledges the inadequacy of her ultimate response as a witness, for, in this episode, she ultimately reverts to the stance of the passive spectator, as she says, “I don’t know, I just find when the news comes on I switch the channel,” thus distancing herself from the knowledge of human suffering. This commentary models a process that attempts to make the first person social through the acknowledgement that there is no easy position in which the speaking subject can reside in its attempt to witness to human suffering.

Whereas the commentary on the murder of James Byrd, Jr. focuses on the difficulty of acting as a witness in the media age, *DLMBL* does not foreclose the possibility of the ethical

⁵⁷ Wallace argues that pervasive postmodern irony, spread through television, is an agent of “great despair and stasis in U.S. culture” for it serves no constructive function (171, 183).

practice of witness. The text points to the potentially ethical practice of witness not despite but through consumption of mass media. Earlier in this chapter, I observed that the cultural criticism of Debord and Baudrillard can elucidate some of the problems of media spectatorship that *DLMBL* diagnoses. However, unlike these and other critics of the “culture industry,” such as members of the Frankfurt School of critics, *DLMBL* does not present the refusal of media as a strategy to counter the enervating effects of media saturation; instead, the text allows for the possibility of ethical practice through engagement with the media.⁵⁸ In my reading of *DLMBL* as advancing the possibility of ethical media consumption, I apply Alison Landsberg’s concept of *prosthetic memory*. In contrast to Debord and Baudrillard, Landsberg joins cultural critics such as Stuart Hall and John Fiske, who argue that there is the possibility for individual acts of “meaning making” in the consumption of mass-media commodities, thus allowing for social transformation within consumer capitalism (Landsberg 145). Landsberg theorizes that prosthetic memory is a new form of cultural memory made possible in modernity through advanced communication technologies such as television, newspapers, film, and the Internet. Through consumption of mass-mediated representations of events, “an experience occurs through which the person sutures himself or herself into a larger history . . . the person takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live. The resulting prosthetic memory has the ability to shape that person’s subjectivity and politics” (2). Landsberg acknowledges that the reception of mass cultural commodities is not inherently progressive, but argues that, nevertheless, prosthetic memory has the potential to foster ethical thinking by building empathy across historical periods, races, classes, and nations (145, 152). Although

⁵⁸ Emma Kimberly has advanced one possible way to read *DLMBL* as ethically engaging with the media as modeling the process of de-naturalizing and interrogating media images and thus enabling compassionate human relations in the fear-based cultural climate after 9/11. While we share an interest on ethical reception of mediated images, my exploration differs in a focus on the speaking subject’s account of witnessing and an application of the concept of prosthetic memory.

Landsberg's study focuses on historical narratives, the concept of "prosthetic memory" nevertheless has relevance for Rankine's writings on twenty-first century culture because both Landsberg and Rankine explore the process of the consumption of mass media as a important force that shapes modern subjectivity, and both seek a way to orient ethical thinking in a media-saturated age.

DLMBL indicates that the reception of mass mediated culture has the potential to foster ethical thinking through the embodied experience of prosthetic memory. The speaking subject notes her bodily reactions to media accounts of two different black men who are victims of police brutality. The text discusses Abner Louima, who was "sodomized with a broken broomstick while in police custody," and Amadou Diallo, an unarmed African immigrant who was shot to death in his Bronx apartment building (56, 142). The verbal text is juxtaposed with photos of the men within illustrations of television sets, a placement which underscores the speaking subject's relation to the men as facilitated through the media (56, 57). The speaking subject prefaces the visual and verbal descriptions of these men with accounts of her own bodily torment: "I get a sharp pain in my gut. . . . Not quite a caving in, just a feeling of bits of my inside twisting away from flesh in the form of a blow to the body. Sometimes I look into someone's face and I must brace myself—the blow is on its way" (56). After the discussion of Louima's debilitating assault, the speaker says, "Instinctively my hand braces my abdomen" (56). Furthermore, following the account of Diallo's death, the speaking subject remarks, "There is no innovating loss. It was never invented, it happened as something physical, something physically experienced" (57). In these comments, Rankine highlights the speaking subject's experience of bodily pain; this emphasis on the viewer's bodily experiences by proxy accords with Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory. In *DLMBL*, the speaking subject's memory of

an event is “prosthetic” in that she does not have a “natural,” lived experience of the events she describes, for she instead engages with them through the media. Moreover, as Landsberg theorizes, such “memories, like an artificial limb, are actually worn on the body; these are sensuous memories produced by an *experience* of mass-mediated representations . . . Also, prosthetic memories, like an artificial limb, often mark a trauma” (20). In *DLMBL*, the speaking subject learns of the trauma suffered by Louima, Diallo, and Byrd through “mass-mediated representations” that nevertheless translate into the subject’s “sensuous” memory of bodily pain. The subject’s physical experience of pain indicates empathy towards suffering others that stands in marked contrast to the detached attitude of spectatorship. In *DLBML*, Rankine asserts, “to feel loss to the point of being bent over each time” is a way “to value each life” (57). The speaking subject’s adopted experience of each trauma of police brutality as a “personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live” is an example of a type of witness through media consumption (Landsberg 2).

DLMBL demonstrates that, in contrast to “sterile attitude of the spectator,” the fruitful position of ethical witness allows for the possibility of hope. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed an episode where the speaking subject registers her despair as she reads in the *New York Times* that antiretroviral drugs had been denied to millions of HIV positive South Africans by President Mbeki. Within the same episode, the subject also declares both her relief, as well as previous disturbance, when she reads that Mbeki has reversed his decision and allowed the antiretrovirals: “My body relaxes. My shoulders fall back. I had not known that my distress at Mbeki’s previous position against distribution of the drugs had physically lodged itself like a virus within me”; “Such distress moved in with muscle and bone” (117, 118). In this passage, the use of bodily metaphors—“like a virus” and “distress moved in with muscle and bone”—again indicates the

formation of embodied, prosthetic memory, and therefore a level of participation on behalf of the media consumer that goes beyond the abstracted relationship between spectator and spectacle.

Within this proxy embodiment, the speaker has shifted from spectatorial detachment to the adoption of an attitude of openness and vulnerability. This effect on her continues, as she hears the good news that the sanction against the drugs has been lifted: “Its entrance by necessity slowly translated my already grief into a tremendously exhausted hope. The translation occurred tremendously, perhaps occurred simply because I am alive. The translation occurs as a form of life. Then life, which seems so full of waiting, awakes suddenly into a life of hope” (118).

Although “tremendously exhausted,” the language of life, hope, and awakening stands in direct contrast to the theme of living death that pervades much of *DLMBL*. Whereas the sterile attitude of the spectator leads to the numbness of living death through the change of the channel, the ethical stance of witness delivers pain and relief, despair and hope. The experience of witness is not a simple shift to comforting thoughts, for it signifies a strenuous engagement with others’ suffering. Thus, the text advocates for and demonstrates a process of subjective openness to others through news media accounts.

In addition to the foregoing examples, *DLMBL* theorizes that poetic texts are able to be engaged actively in the “meaning making” processes of media consumption that ultimately result in the ethical practice of witness. In addition to describing and advocating for witness, the text theorizes the practice of poetic witness by linking the bodily experience of prosthetic memory to the process of composition. Through a reference to the work of contemporary poet Myung Mi Kim, the text theorizes ethical practice by linking the physical experience of prosthetic memory to the process of poetic witness: “Myung Mi Kim did say that the poem is really a responsibility to everyone in a social space. She did say it was okay to cramp, to clog, to fold over at the gut, to

have to put hand to flesh, to have to hold the pain, and then to translate it here. She did say, in so many words, that what alerts, alters” (57). In this passage, the process of the poem begins with a prosthetic memory, an embodied experience of pain in the reception of mass-media accounts of human suffering, which the poet then “translate(s)” into the poem’s language. The concluding phrase “what alerts, alters” plays on a double meaning: the bodily sensation of pain “alerts” the poet, thus altering her consciousness, and the poet “alerts” readers through writing, thus potentially transforming others’ thoughts and feelings. The poem conceptualized as “a responsibility to everyone in a social space” has the potential to catalyze cultural transformation through the process of witness. The verbal and visual texts of *DLMBL* enact the role of witness as it details the suffering of victims of violence and social injustice.⁵⁹ The practice of witness through writing of poetic texts fulfills the responsibility and “response-ability” that is at the heart of intersubjectivity.

Writing as Ethical Practice

The establishment of the possibility of poetic witness is only one dimension of how *DLMBL* holds up writing as a potentially ethical practice. As the text *DLMBL* nears its conclusion, it pays increasing attention to the topic of responsibility/“response-ability.” In the final four sections of the text, I find a shift in tone, one that moves away from a sense of deflated despair or numbness and towards an emerging, tentative sense of hope. While this movement is non-linear, and does not present a simple progression across the disjointed episodes of *DLMBL*, I argue that several glimpses of hopefulness accumulate momentum within the text’s concluding sequences. Furthermore, several episodes in the concluding sections of *DLMBL* emphasize the instrumental role that the arts can play in countering the enervating effects of media saturation

⁵⁹ In an interview for *Jubilat*, Rankine remarks that men like Byrd and Louima “needed to be brought back in images” because media accounts and political conversations had erased them in gestures of closure (23).

and consumerism. Specifically, *DLMBL* draws on Levinas's ethics to highlight the ethical potential of language.

Earlier in this chapter, I referenced some of the broad strokes of Levinas's critique of Western ideology, with its insistence on "my place in the sun," and I have observed the resonance of this critique with Rankine's stated values. At this point, I turn to a more in-depth consideration of Levinas's ethics in order to explain how *DLMBL* builds models of other-oriented subjectivity and writing as ethical practice. My earlier delineation of Sartre's Existentialist philosophy as it theorizes "the Look"—the hostile gaze and potential encounter that the speaking subject of *DLMBL* avoids—can be a productive entry point to Levinas's thought. Levinas's ethics directly criticize the hostile relations between self and other that he sees as intrinsic to Sartre's Existentialism, for he argues that Sartre's model of intersubjectivity is basically Hegelian in the struggle for domination (Keltner and Julian 55). Furthermore, Levinas faults Sartre for what he sees as his erroneous priority of ontology, or existence understood as "being in itself." Sartre argues that "existence precedes essence," where "existence" refers to the "being in itself" or "being for itself" of an individual and "essence" refers to purpose. "Being in itself" is likened to the subject in a state of self-containment and, therefore, mastery. Sartre asserts that individuals are in tension between the desired condition of "being in itself" and the problematic "being for others." Contra Sartre, Levinas argues that ethics, or "being for the other" is the "first fact of existence" (Eskin 21). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas posits that the face of the Other, both in in flesh and in language, interrupts the subject's autonomy and demands a response (82-84). The welcome of the Other involves the recognition of the Other's radical alterity, that is, the irreducibility of the Other to the subject's own thoughts or classifications (*Totality* 48-50). Thus, the ethical encounter Levinas describes is not an occurrence where the

subject imposes its will to shape the Other or assimilates alterity to the sameness of the self, but, instead, involves the subject's openness toward the radical alterity of the Other.

Near the conclusion of *DLMBL*, Rankine deploys Levinas's ethics directly in order to position writing as an ethical practice that can counter the loneliness invoked the book's title and throughout its lyrical dialogues. In the penultimate section of the main body of the text, Rankine cites from Levinas's essay "The Transcendence of Words":

Then all life is a form of waiting, but it is the waiting of loneliness. One waits to recognize the other as one sees the self. Levinas writes, "The subject who speaks is situated in relation to the other. This privilege of the other ceases to be incomprehensible once we admit that the first fact of existence is neither being in itself nor being for itself but being for the other, in other words, that human existence is a creature. By offering a word, the subject putting himself forward lays himself open, and, in a sense, prays" (120).⁶⁰

In this passage, Levinas refers to his philosophical critique of Sartre's Existentialist ontology. Rather than appearing *ex nihilo*, "human existence is a creature" in that it emerges only through intersubjective relations, and those relations are based in the subject's responsibility for the Other. In Levinas's words, "I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility" (*Ethics and Infinity* 95).

⁶⁰ Although Levinas is a philosopher who often draws on Judaism, in this chapter, I follow critics such as Attridge and Jenkins who incorporate Levinasian ethics into their discussions of literature without applying the religious dimension of his thought. This secular appropriation accords with Rankine's citation of Levinas. While quoting Levinas's ethical claims for speech, she includes his concept of speech as a kind of prayer but is quick to distance herself from the religious dimensions of Levinas's ethics. Immediately following the citation of Levinas, the next episode in the text describes an encounter with a Christian missionary handing out evangelical pamphlets on the street. The speaking subject admits that "was brought up this way"—that is, as a Christian—but she still throws away the pamphlet (121). I read the inclusion of the evangelism episode to signal the text's distance from any particular religious faith.

The passage of Levinas cited in *DLMBL*, framed by the speaker's meditation on "the waiting of loneliness," contends that "being for another" provides the antidote to the isolation and sterility borne from the Western glorification of self-sufficiency. While Levinas is cited directly only once in *DLMBL*, a Levinasian focus on responsibility for the Other, and this responsibility as an antidote to loneliness, is articulated earlier *DLMBL*, in a lyrical dialogue situated roughly halfway through the text:

Define loneliness?

Yes.

It's what we can't do for each other.

What do we mean to each other?

What does a life mean?

Why are we here if not for each other? (62)

The text links loneliness to feelings of uselessness that signifies the absence of ethical practice, what "we can't do for each other." This lack of action indicates the responsibility of the self for the other, a responsibility that is confirmed by the final question, "Why are we here if not for each other?" which points, by negation, to Levinas's concept that responsibility for the other precedes the existence of the self. Furthermore, a few pages after the citation from "Transcendence of Words," the theme of loneliness resurfaces in another prose poetry section. The speaking subject states that she experiences a sense of loneliness in the face of the world's suffering and death: "This loneliness stems from a feeling of uselessness" (129). Loneliness borne from uselessness essentially re-states the definition of loneliness as "what we can't do for each other." If loneliness stems from uselessness, from the inability to *do* for another, then the converse must be true; interconnectedness is achieved through useful action, and through

responsibility one takes for the other. *DLMBL* implies that the problem of loneliness can be addressed through the Levinasian stance of responsibility for the other.

Furthermore, with its focus on the “subject who speaks,” the passage by Levinas from the essay, “The Transcendence of Words,” emphasizes how language is a means of extending the subject in relation to the other. In the essay, Levinas uses the literary character of Robinson Crusoe to illustrate the importance of speech as positioning the self in relation to another:

“[Crusoe] finds in his encounter with Man Friday the greatest event of his insular life. It is the moment when finally a man who speaks replaces the inexpressible sadness of echoes” (148). In contrast to the “sadness of echoes,” speech—in the encounter between self and other—disrupts the existence of the self “as a subject and a master” (149). The disruption of speech is necessary, for it heals the “sadness” of solipsism and re-dresses the imbalanced power dynamics that accompany the assumption of the self as “master.” Indeed, the loss of mastery indicates that while there is much to gain in the encounter with the Other, there is also much that is risked. The statement “the subject putting himself forward lays himself open” bespeaks a stance of sincerity and vulnerability on behalf of the one who uses speech. Like witnessing, speaking conveys an approach that contrasts starkly with spectatorial detachment. With its reference to Levinasian thought, *DLMBL* embraces a stance of openness, sincerity, and humility, and applies this stance to writing as an ethical practice.

It is important to note that *DLMBL* tempers the idealistic possibilities of writing as ethical practice by presenting the occupation of the writer as well intentioned but far from omnipotent. Instead, text represents the speaking subject as a writer who has socially responsible intentions but is beset by feelings of despair and futility. In one episode, the text describes a dream in which the speaking subject has a conversation with a replacement mourner, who is signified by “she”:

“In the dream we talk about what a lonely occupation she has chosen. No, she says, you, you are the one with the lonely occupation. Death follows you into your dreams. The loneliness in death is second to the loneliness of life” (122). This description is self-reflexive, for the “lonely occupation” the mourner speaks of indicates the speaking subject’s occupation of writing. Several pages later, Rankine acknowledges that, as a writer, she has ethical intentions, but struggles with feelings of uselessness and loneliness: “Or, well, I tried to fit language into the shape of usefulness. The world moves through words as if the bodies the words reflect did not exist. The world, like a giant liver, receives everyone and everything, including these words: is he dead? Is she dead?” (129). The speaking subject thus questions the impact any writing can have on the “world,” which processes everyone and everything indiscriminately, including bodies, alive and dead. As a result, the writer feels despair and loneliness due to such feelings of “uselessness” (129). This kind of loneliness and uselessness that she experiences as a writer is likened to a condition of death through the fictional writer, Costello, the title character of J.M. Coetzee’s 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*: “Then Coetzee’s Costello says in her fictional lecture, ‘for instants at a time I know what it is like to be a corpse’” (129).⁶¹ While acknowledging her struggles with feelings of uselessness as a writer, Rankine acknowledges that she is not alone among in her frustration to be of use to the “world”; not only does Rankine cite Coetzee’s fictional character, Costello, as a writer who feels dead at times, but she also quotes fellow contemporary poet Fanny Howe, in her struggles with despair in contemporary American culture: “‘I learned to renounce a sense of independence by degrees and finally felt defeated by the times I lived in. Obedient to them’” (128). *DLMBL* represents writing as a project based on an ethical foundation, an attempt to “fit language into the shape of usefulness,” but it also

⁶¹ Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Viking Press, 2003, 76-77. In the endnotes of *DLMBL*, Rankine describes Costello as “an aging novelist who is struggling with a writer’s greatest fear, a loss for words” (154).

demonstrates that the attempt to engage with the world through language is an activity fraught with feelings of loneliness, uselessness, and despair. Thus, the speaking subject as writer is far from the authoritative and omnipotent author of Enlightenment humanism. She is instead a writing subject that self-reflexively acknowledges her limitations.

Instead of presenting the writer as a domineering figure, the speaking subject of *DLMBL*, ultimately makes what Retallack articulates as a “*poethical wager*.” Retallack argues that the artist wagers that, over time, cultural change can occur through “contributions to climates of value and opinion” (3). The possibility for cultural change is akin to the butterfly effect—an artist cannot know or control any of the possible effects of his or her work, and effects may be infinitesimal and subject to many “swerves”; nevertheless, the artist seeks to guide a project with courage, concern, and responsible awareness. (3). Far from a creative work emerging from the perspective of the unique and exceptional artist, a text’s poethical dimension is revealed through its orientation towards a reading audience, and advocates poetic texts that invite collaborative meaning-making *between* poet and reader. While grappling with a sense of futility and despair, the speaking subject as writer in *DLMBL* ultimately takes the Levinasian risk of laying herself open through the writing project. Indeed, it is only through this risk that the text surfaces from an atmosphere made toxic by spectatorship, consumerism, and isolation. Indeed, a key way for one to work through and out of the living death of loneliness in *DLMBL* is through lyric as encounter between poet and reader.

Poetic Handshake: Writing, Reading, and Ethical Encounter

As I’ve mentioned earlier in this chapter, Rankine’s poetics articulate her intentions towards the ethical foundations of her writing, particularly in its emphasis on the responsibility of the “I” to “the intelligence (think humanity) of the ‘you’” and the use of reflexivity to indicate

“the first-person social” (132). In addition to the alignment with Blasing’s model of lyric as rhetoric, which depends upon the poet’s credibility to establish the lyric “I” as an ethical figure, Rankine’s poetics also resonates with Water’s claims that lyric tends to be fundamentally concerned with address to the reader. I read *DLMBL* as a poem that conveys, in Waters’ words “a dependence on the later reader, seeking her answering pressure” (144). Indeed, Waters’ critical exploration of lyric address includes an extended exploration of Paul Celan’s poetics, which *DLMBL* cites directly as well.

DLMBL extends the Levinasian view of speech as an ethical act through the citation of the poetics of Paul Celan, thus constructing a Levinasian-Celian model of poetry as a life-sustaining, ethical encounter. On the final two pages of the main text, *DLMBL* includes the citation of letter in which Celan likened a poem to a handshake:

Or Paul Celan said that the poem was no different from a handshake. *I cannot see any basic difference between a handshake and a poem*—is how Rosemary Waldrop translated his German. The handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another. Hence the poem is that—Here. I am here. This conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence has everything to do with being alive. (130)

Paul Celan’s metaphor of the poem as a handshake is used to theorize how engagement with the reading and writing of poetic texts can be way for one to recognize her intersubjectivity and thereby work her way out of the living death of isolation, towards a sense of “being alive.” The textual invocation of Celan’s metaphor of a poem as a handshake acknowledges a sense of engagement, responsibility, and openness to being remade on behalf of both writers and readers. The declaration in *DLMBL* that the simultaneous assertion of a self and a handing over of the self

“has everything to do with being alive” is an indication that poetry has the potential to be a life-sustaining encounter. Rankine’s move towards a poetics of encounter is inherently ethical, for it offers the recognition of the self as fundamentally constituted by and responsible for relations with others.

Notably, the metaphor of the handshake is a bodily metaphor—a “solidity of presence”—that relies on the notion of touch. Waters similarly underscores the notion of presence in his analysis of Celan’s handshake metaphor in the book *Lyric Touch*, an extended analysis on poetic address. Waters observes that Celan’s description envisions poetry “as a means of real contact” by someone who, in Celan’s words, ““carries his existence into language”” (160). Both Rankine and Waters highlight how Celan’s poetics of encounter depends upon on the idea of presence. The commentary in *DLMBL* notes, “the handshake is our decided ritual of both asserting (I am here) and handing over (here) a self to another” which involves a “conflation of the solidity of presence with the offering of this same presence” (131). Waters similarly observes that “A handshake greets, but it also seals and affirms; it verifies something, or testifies to it” (160). Namely, the handshake affirms is the shared presence of writer and reader: “[t]his is communication in which two bodies touch, in which misgivings about response may evaporate. As Celan says, it is (or can be) a matter of *presence*, of reality” (161). This metaphorical handshake indicates “two human beings sharing, with their pronouns *I* and *you*, the same ontological space” of the text, despite the distances of space, time, and mortality (161). Waters argues that, when it occurs, the lyric address of the reader brings to us the “consciousness of our own reading’s historical singularity” and the accompanying “thought that may move us, sometimes, to take responsibility for being the poem’s reader” (161). Waters insists that, for such an encounter or touch to happen, it must be voluntary on behalf of the reader: “Any feeling of

obligation here will be your feeling, not a burden imposed by another. If, trusting, you make the attempt, and reach to take the offered hand, it is of yourself you become aware, open, obliged” (162). Thus, the very model of reading as ethical encounter is based on the reader’s reception and the reader’s active responsibility. Textual encounter cannot be imposed from a domineering author, for it can only arise as the reader extends herself forward in the event of reading.

In my reading of the invocation of Celan’s poetics of the handshake in *DLMBL*, I suggest metaphor of touch rather than vision also accords with Levinas’s thinking. As Oliver observes, Levinas rejects vision “as a distancing sense that mistakenly puts the subject at the center of the universe” (204). Levinas reads the gaze as akin to the Sartre’s hostile Look: distant, objectivizing, and totalizing (*Otherwise than Being* 63). In contrast, Levinas argues that “[s]ocial relations . . . are the original deployment of the Relation that is no longer open to the gaze that would encompass its terms” (*Totality and Infinity* 290). On the other hand, touch considered as caress is a means to connection between self and other: “In starting with *touching*, interpreted . . . as caress, and *language*, interpreted not as the traffic of information but as contact, we have tried to describe *proximity* as irreducible to consciousness and thematization” (Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* 80). Whereas the distance of the subject’s gaze reduces the Other to subject’s intellectualizing and categorizing operations, the proximity of touch articulates a way of relating that does not revolve around the subject’s sole experience (Oliver 206). Levinas then extends this conceptualization of the proximity of touch to language “as contact.” Celan’s handshake metaphor for language as social contact similarly replaces the connection of touch with the cruelty, isolation and disembodied elements of the spectatorial gaze. The Celanian handshake indicates a sense of mutuality and respect that the text of *DLMBL* highlights as it states that the handshake both asserts a self and hands over “a self to another.” Thus, language

can be conceptualized as Levinasian-Celanian contact in which both subject and Other extend themselves and both enact “response-ability” by answering and enabling one another’s response. *DLMBL* thus offers what I call a Levinasian-Celanian model of poetic text as ethical encounter in which the writer and reader come into meaningful contact.

DLMBL does not confine this notion of encounter to poetic or literary texts alone. Indeed, Rankine offers an example of a musical performance by American gospel singer Mahalia Jackson in order to gesture towards art’s potential to transform listeners/readers profoundly. Through reception of art, listeners/readers are depicted as able to both come to life and towards an ethical stance. The speaker describes the response to a publicly screened documentary of a performance Jackson gave in 1971:

In the auditorium a room full of strangers listened to Mahalia Jackson sing ‘Let There Be Peace on Earth’ and stood up and gave a standing ovation to a movie screen. Her clarity of vision crosses thirty years to address intimately each of us. It is as if her voice has always been dormant within us, waiting to be awakened, even though “it had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, (and) through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech.”

Perhaps Mahalia, like Paul Celan, has already lived all our lives for us. Perhaps that is the definition of genius. [...] And even though the lyrics of the song are, ‘Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me,’ I am hearing, ‘*Let it begin in me.*’” (97)

Mahalia Jackson’s performance is experienced within a collective, but the text emphasizes its power is its ability to register its message within the individual listener. This description foregrounds the performance’s ability “to address intimately each of us,” that is, to appeal to

listeners as addressees. The performance's effects depend upon on the listener's openness to alteration of herself through encounter with the work of art. But it does not foreclose the possibility of the listener modifying the artwork; in this example, the speaker adapts the lyrics of "Let There Be Peace on Earth" to "'*Let it begin in me.*'"

Significantly, the episode describing Mahalia Jackson's performance inaugurates the shift from despair to tentative hope that I trace in the final four sections of *DLMBL*. The text connects the self's exterior and interior registers through the experience of artistic performance, for it links the outside—the voice of Jackson—with the "dormant" voice "waiting to be awakened" within the listener. The metaphor of dormancy and awakening signals the movement from exhausted resignation to a culture of living death towards a stance that is at once ethical—concerned with the well-being of others—and more fully alive. Indeed, the shift towards such an ethical stance is exhibited in the content of song lyrics from "Let There Be Peace on Earth," which embraces pacifism and fraternity, in contrast to the hawkish and divisive rhetoric of the post-9/11 era.

Furthermore, Rankine links Jackson's and Celan's artistry as sharing a common "genius." The text compares Jackson's voice to Celan's comments on language in a speech he gave when he received the Bremen Prize. In the speech, Celan asserts that, through the Nazi occupation and the Holocaust of World War II, language "had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, (and) through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech" but nevertheless "went through and could resurface, 'enriched' by it all" (Celan 34). In citing this passage, Rankine compares Jackson's voice to Celan's poetic language and implicitly points to the suffering that these two artists faced during their lifetimes as members of persecuted minority groups. During the Holocaust, Paul Celan was incarcerated in a labor camp and lost his parents. As Rankine observes in the endnotes to *DLMBL*, Mahalia Jackson, a famous African-American

gospel singer and civil rights activist, “faced particular adversity in the later years of her life” in the political upheavals of the 1960s and in her personal life and health (149). The statement “Perhaps Mahalia, like Paul Celan, has already lived all our lives for us,” and the Hegelian assessment that “the man who is better merely expresses this same world better than the others” points to the lived experience of the artists who vividly express the world in which they live.

In the comparison between Celan and Jackson, the text advances a kind of art that is both rooted within a historical time and positioned towards a receiving audience across time. In the Bremen Prize speech, Celan contends, “the poem does not stand outside time. True, it claims the infinite and tries to reach across time—but across, not above” (34). Similarly, Rankine claims that Jackson’s “clarity of vision crosses thirty years.” Poetry and other arts that reach “across time” stand in contrast to conventional ideas of the Romantic vision of transcendence, where the poet reaches “above” historical reality. As Retallack explains “Stereotypical romanticism, the idealist strain, was not about being tossed in the messy turbulence,” but this perception of cultural realities is flawed, for “[t]o rise above the occasion is to miss it” (37). Poetry that “tries to reach across time,” on the other hand, indicates an orientation of the art that recognizes the artist’s social milieu while also moving towards a receiving audience, whomever that audience might be. In Celan’s words, poems are like a “letter in a bottle: “poems are *en route*; they are headed toward . . . Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you” (34). Celan also describes poems as “gifts to the attentive”; as Waters explains, poems “can give of themselves precisely because they are not timeless but are the vessels of time’s lapse, as that lapse is felt” (Waters 161). This ability of art to reach across time and express “this same world better than the others” indicates the possibility of a hopeful response to the quagmire of feeling “defeated by the times” one lives in.

What conclusions can be drawn from Rankine's extended comparison between Jackson's musical performance and Celan's poetry? The concept of poetry as akin to performance can be illuminated by Derek Attridge's argument for writing and reading as ethical practice in *The Singularity of Literature*. Attridge argues that literature can be considered a *performance* that is enacted in the reading process (87). Like Waters, Attridge concludes that the creative act of a written text (or literary "work") is figured as an "other" for which readers are called to take responsibility (*Singularity* 33). Attridge insists that to read responsibly does not indicate one correct reading, but it does depend upon a reader's recognition of a text's singularity and alterity. Moreover, reading responsibly involves opening oneself to the possibility of being remade by a literary text. Reading as ethical practice is not a closed circle, however, for it also involves imagination and creativity; indeed, responsible reading leads to the creation of new works. Thus, a reader can, by the act of reading, enact the performance of literature, and the impact of that performance can spark the reader, in turn, to write or to produce other art creatively (*Singularity* 92-3). By viewing the concluding sections of *DLMBL* in light of Attridge's view of literature as a performance that can be enacted through reading and transformed into ethical practice, we see the impact of the example of Jackson's musical performance: Jackson's voice awakens and transforms a dormant sense of life and hope within the listener. The purpose of the performance is not its own endpoint; it, too, can be considered in terms of Retallack's butterfly effect, a force that can effect cultural change, infinitesimal and unpredictable as that change may be. The text of *DLMBL* emphasizes the speaker's adaptation of the song lyric's "'*Let it begin in me*'" to highlight art's potential to spark new creation and hopefulness within the listener/speaking subject.

I further extend Attridge's understanding of ethical reading to *DLMBL* to read how the speaker, as a relational subject, is positioned as an active—and responsible—reader of numerous

other poetic texts. While numerous discourses are present in *DLMBL*, poetry takes on a particularly significant role, for the text includes entire short poems and lines of poetry by Celan as well as Czeslaw Milosz, César Vallejo, and Fanny Howe. Notably, there are several introductions of citations that refer to the voice of poet as if embodied, in direct address to the speaker. Celan's poem is introduced with the statement "Paul Celan whispers in my ear" (61). A line from Joseph Brodsky's poetry is quoted "as if he is standing next to me"; despite Brodsky's death, "this fact does not stop his voice from entering the room every time I look up" (17). The presence of both poetry and poets' voices in the course of the text bespeaks the centrality of poetic encounter that is present throughout *DLMBL*; the speaking subject is involved in various poetic handshakes as a reader of multiple poetic texts. Ultimately, as an active and responsible reader, Rankine engages in the process of responsive reading that Attridge outlines, through the formation of another creative text.

The visual and verbal texts of the closing pages of *DLMBL* position the book as a call for ethical relations within contemporary American culture. The penultimate page of the main text of *DLMBL* concludes with the quotation and commentary of Paul Celan's poetic handshake and a photograph of a billboard in a field alongside a highway. The billboard broadcasts, in black text on a white background, a single word with ending punctuation: "HERE." The final page includes a commentary on the significance of the poetic assertion of "here":

Or one meaning of here is 'In this world, in this life, on earth. In this place or position, indicating the presence of,' or in other words, I am here. It also means to hand something to somebody—Here you are. Here, he said to her. Here both recognizes and demands recognition. In order for something to be handed over a

hand must extend and a hand must receive. We must both be here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of. (131)

The image of a billboard sign along the highway that reads “Here.” echoes the visual imagery of the cover, where the title, *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, broadcasts from a similar billboard sign, also in all capital letters. Thus the monosyllabic assertion “Here.” in the final pages revises and adds to the plaintive supplication of the title. The word “Here.” and the following commentary also emphasize the presence of the world and the subject’s position within it: “[i]n this world, in this life, on earth. In this place or position.” Moreover, the images of the billboard signs that visually frame *DLBML* resonate with a particular American-ness: the emptiness of both the field and the roadway signify an openness and potential that co-opts and revises imagery of the frontier regularly invoked within American cultural mythology. The visual imagery indicates an expanse of relatively open American landscape, but it is one shaped by the contemporary age with the highway and road signs signifying predetermined passageways and mass communications. Early in the text of *DLMBL*, a citation from Cornel West states, “hope is different from American optimism” (21); similarly, the image of the billboard reading “Here.” represents a kind of hope that is in contrast to the empty idealism of American optimism. Like the rest of *DLMBL*, the image of this landscape does not represent an idyllic fantasy of the American frontier, but the quotidian reality of contemporary life, thus reinforcing the understanding that we have no choice but to forge ahead in everyday life, from wherever we are. By using billboard signs, which clutter the American landscape with advertising messages, Rankine thus replaces the standard American reduction of human relations of commerce to those of ethical relations through the offer of openness of the self to the Other.

The concluding commentary of *DLMBL* emphasizes the textual articulation of relational subjectivity as an ethical gesture. It restates the earlier commentary on Celan's poetic handshake with its similar emphasis on shared presence within the poem as it states, "In order for something to be handed over a hand must extend and a hand must receive. We must both be here in this world in this life in this place indicating the presence of." By extending forward to any passersby on the roadway, the billboard is a visual approximation of the Celan's metaphors of poetry as a "letter in a bottle" that may wash up on the shore of whomever is the recipient (Celan 34-35) or poems as "gifts for the attentive" (Celan 26). Significantly, the statement "I am here," which Rankine states three times in the final two pages of text, articulates a re-wording of the Biblical formulation "Here I am," which Levinas invokes as the avowal of the ethical stance of the self towards the other: "The tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility ... To say: here I am [*me voici*]. To do something for the Other. To give." (*Ethics and Infinity* 97). The "I" of "I am here" in *DLMBL* is an "I" that only occurs in a relational dynamic. The relational dynamic is crucial in its ability to sustain life, for, in contrast to the isolation of living death, it "has everything to do with being alive." This life-sustaining practice only occurs through the relation that occurs *between* self and other—in Rankine's reading, between reader and writer.

DLMBL emphasizes the poetic handshake/encounter as a place to begin. "Here" situates *DLMBL* as a lyric that is a event that occurs as an encounter between self and other, for there is a reiteration of both the handshake and the gift: "In order for something to be handed over a hand must extend and a hand must receive" (131). The assertion of "here" forges a meaningful encounter, the possibility of the movement from "I" to "we": "We must both be here in this world in this life in this place, indicating the presence of." The unfinished statement gestures to an openness rather than a closure of possibilities—the "we" is forged by the process of

“indicating” and the invocation of “presence of” whatever may be present. While I argue that the concluding sections of the main body of the text of *DLMBL* are of paramount importance for reading *DLMBL* as a poethical text, the articulation of the Levinasian-Celanian model of poetic encounter in the ending does not evince an orderly sense of closure or finality. Instead, the concluding sections outline the flux of a creating consciousness that gestures towards a place from which writers and readers begin to participate in the creation and reception of creative texts.

CHAPTER THREE

“THE STRANGE WHOEVER THAT GOES UNDER THE NAME OF ‘I’ IN MY POEMS”:

LYRIC SUBJECTIVITY AND ETHICS IN FANNY HOWE’S LATER POETRY

In this chapter, I explore the poetry and poetics of Fanny Howe, a prolific writer who has been producing poetry, fiction, and literary essays since the 1960s. While Howe, who was born in 1940, is from an earlier generation than Claudia Rankine and Elizabeth Robinson, I am including an investigation of her writings in this project as she has continued to produce considerable output into the twenty-first century. Furthermore, Howe’s poetry has, if anything, gained in recognition in recent years, as she has received several prestigious awards, and her recent writings remain politically and culturally relevant.⁶² In this chapter, I focus largely on selections of Howe’s later poetry, prose-poetry, and poetics. In particular, I reference selections of poetry and essays on poetics that are reprinted or originally appearing in turn-of-the twenty-first century collections, including *Selected Poems* (2000), *The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life* (2003), and *On the Ground* (2004). I emphasize writings from this later time period not only because they are contemporaneous with the works of Rankine and Robinson and thus speak to a similar historical moment—all three poets, for example, address 9/11 within their writings—but also because Howe’s poetry and writings on poetics in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century respond to contemporary discourse on American lyric poetry, which is situated squarely within the postlanguage moment. Rather giving extended attention to Howe’s earlier poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, which was contemporaneous with the ascendancy of Language writing, I will focus on more definitive postlanguage poetic texts from the late 1990s and the twenty-first century. There are two exceptions, however, for I will draw upon two

⁶² Howe won the 2001 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize for *Selected Poems*, a 2008 Award in Literature from the American Academy and Instituted of Arts and Letters, and the Ruth Lily Poetry Prize in 2009 (“Fanny Howe.” poetryfoundation.org).

excerpts of poetry originally published in the 1980s (and reprinted in *Selected Poems* in 2000) in order to demonstrate some of examples of how some of Howe's earlier texts demonstrate lyrical, even romantic qualities that are put into conversation with modernist/avant-garde elements. Finally, as with my exploration of Rankine and Robinson, I take up Howe's writings that theorize and/or demonstrate her engagement with and intentionality towards what I argue are ethical articulations of postlanguage lyric subjectivity.⁶³ Therefore, some of Howe's prose essays that address poetics, politics, ethics, and spirituality directly apply to my project, while, for example, her works of fiction are not as relevant.

Also, as with my investigation of Rankine's writings in chapter one, I am engaged in a poethical investigation of Howe's postlanguage lyric poetry. Thus, in this chapter, I pose similar questions, including, what model of lyric subjectivity does Howe's poetry and poetics offer? How does Howe present an ethical articulation of the lyric "I"? Since Howe's poetic texts are often look more like postromantic lyric than Rankine's do, my exploration of Howe's hybrid writings focuses on the question of Howe's poetic lineage. What poetic predecessor(s) of Howe's can be identified in order to explain her use of poetic forms? How does Howe draw on certain poetic lineages to advance an ethical deployment of lyric poetry? Furthermore, as I take up the question of Howe's ethical considerations, I find that Howe's spiritual and intellectual engagement with Roman Catholic theology is so fundamental to her writing that any inquiry must incorporate her approach to theology in conjunction with her ethics. Thus, in this chapter, I also ask, what ethics does Howe advance in light of her theological beliefs? How do her ethics, in conjunction with her theological approach, shape her postlanguage lyric writing? Further, with these considerations of Howe's theology and ethics in mind, what relations between writer and

⁶³ Notably, Howe exerts a considerable influence on the other two poets in this dissertation, particularly Robinson, who has cited the importance of Howe's writing in several essays and interviews.

reader are advanced in Howe's writings, and how might these relations promote writing and reading as ethical practices?

In this chapter, I argue that Howe's lyric subject indicates a postmodern "turn to the other" that contributes to a redefinition of subjectivity as "being-in-the-world" for the other person and thus allows for an ethical deployment of the lyric "I" that is other-oriented rather than self-centered. With this recalibration of ethical subjectivity, Howe's theologically-inflected poetic texts sustain the presence of a lyric "I" that is acknowledged as a construction while still registering both the subject's exteriority *and* interiority. Furthermore, her postlanguage lyrics reference subjective experiences of immanence *and* transcendence. Howe's ethical deployment of lyric subjectivity can be illuminated by tracing her poetry's inheritance of George Oppen's Objectivist exploration of the ethics of poetry writing, its embrace of liberation theology, and its resonance with the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. Taken together, these tracings reveal Howe's ongoing articulation of a subjectivity that emphasizes "relationality, interdependence, and solidarity, based on the philosophical theology of *otherness* and *difference*" (Alain Mayama 95).

Critical Considerations of Howe's Lyric Subjectivity

Howe is an innovative poet who overtly embraces the possibility of transcendent and mystical experience within contemporary life and poetry. Furthermore, as many critics have noted, her poetic texts register the presence of both interiority and exteriority in the deployment of the lyric subject. Transcendence and interiority are concepts that are both strongly associated with the lyric tradition and may often carry a theological resonance, as they do in Howe's work. Further, approaches to transcendence and interiority are essential to a consideration of Howe's articulation of lyric subjectivity. As Clair Wills argues, Howe's poetry does not fit neatly into the

“two-camp” critical paradigm of 1990s poetry criticism⁶⁴ because her texts draw upon theology to cross the bounds of the lyric subject’s exteriority and interiority, simultaneously rejecting a unique, private subjectivity while nevertheless avowing individual agency (“Marking Time” 120, 122).⁶⁵ Furthermore, like the other postlanguage lyric poets I investigate in this dissertation, Howe recognizes the lyric subject as a construction in her writings, as in *Forged* (1999), where she refers to “my self” as “a fiction.” At the same time, Howe’s texts often draw on her lived experiences and register a sense of interiority. Romana Huk also comments on Howe’s approach to subjectivity in analyses of Howe’s 1985 poetry collection, *Introduction to the World*, and Howe’s 2004 book of literary prose essays and prose-poetry, *The Wedding Dress*. Huk notes that Howe acknowledges that there is no “inner life” in “our postmodern sense”—that is, there is no private, self-created, sealed interiority that exists apart from culture and language (“Alphabets of Unknowing” 70). Huk argues that Howe’s poetics advance a *decreation* of self “that gives itself

⁶⁴ Wills is not alone in focusing on Howe’s lyric subjectivity and noting that Howe’s approach to the lyric subject fits with neither the mainstream, postconfessional embrace of the lyric “I,” nor the Language poetry school’s abjuration of the subject. A special issue of *Spectacular Diseases*, entitled *A Folio for Fanny Howe*, includes several essays on the topic, including a reprint of Wills’s essay “Fanny Howe’s Transcendent Poetics,” and an essay by Huk that I discuss at greater length. Other contributions include Rae Armantrout’s reading of *Q* in which she argues that “Howe proposes that the way beyond the bog of the discredited self is to imagine ourselves as part of a nomadic collectivity” (44); Paul Green’s observation that Howe’s lyric subject shows an isolated, reclusive, or hidden self (54); and Peter Middleton’s contrast between Howe’s poetry and the “conventional” verse of the poet Louise Glück. Middleton observes that Howe’s first-person lyric foregrounds subjective temporality between different moments of consciousness that are typically conflated in conventional lyric poetry’s reportage of self-consciousness, where the present lyric self acts as if it can neutrally mirror the previous subject of self-consciousness (87, 88, 99).

⁶⁵ Wills analyzes the serial poems *O’Clock* and *Q*, from the 1990s, through a theological lens to argue that Howe seeks to open a transcendent dimension within the everyday worlds of humanity, nature, and language. Wills goes on to argue that Howe’s poems, despite their lyrical impulses and transcendental dimension, align with postmodern, avant-garde concerns that focus on the conscious deployment of language rather than straightforward representation (122-3). Wills’s analysis also focuses on Howe’s understanding of time. As with her intellectual influences Samuel Beckett and Simone Weil, who value the ideal of “the anonymous or prophetic voice which speaks out of the void” in order “to fuse human speech with the voice of eternity,” so Howe advances the idea that “the written word which must bridge the gap—and this is precisely because writing is a temporal phenomenon. . . . poetry, by representing both the language of ordinary human interaction, and its temporal and spatial limitations, can reach outwards towards the eternal” (123). Wills suggests that Howe’s work can be understood within a revolutionary Marxist perspective, “indebted to Walter Benjamin’s concept of the ‘Now’ time—a moment of revelation or illumination—which he sets against the idea of a developmental or teleological mechanism of history” (123). Wills also reads Howe’s lyric “I” in gendered terms by arguing that Howe demonstrates in *O’Clock* “a specifically feminine sense of the rhythms of traditional practice and everyday life” by describing women’s submission to the traditional homemaking duties as a “spiritual discipline” (120).

to the other . . . Such thinking foregoes closure and thereby ‘receives the future,’ unfulfillable without the other; it allows for a very new, postmodern enactment of a very old, even biblical ‘truth’—one usually stated as a contradiction: that one must lose *one*’s self to otherness in order to save it” (“A Single Liturgy” 673).⁶⁶ In their arguments, both Wills and Huk emphasize the ways in which Howe’s religious convictions inform her deployment of the lyric “I” because her work draws on spiritual experiences that lie beyond the conventional bounds of the self and necessitate the loss or immersion of self.

In my poethical consideration of Howe’s exploration of transcendence/immanence and interiority/exteriority, I examine two main threads of argument: a consideration of Howe’s lyric poetry in relation to its American poetic lineage and, building on the analyses of Wills and Huk, an investigation of Howe’s theology in relation to her poethics. First, I will situate Howe’s writing in relation to twentieth century poetry and poetics, and then I will turn to an extended consideration of the theological and ethical framework for Howe’s writings. The organization of this chapter somewhat differs from others in this dissertation; rather than starting the chapter with a description of Howe’s use of poetic form, I consider Howe’s use of form diffusely throughout the chapter by first considering her poetic classification and then turning to her use of serial (or what she terms “spiral”) form. My approach differs in this chapter partly because it

⁶⁶ In “A Single Liturgy,” Huk observes that Howe merges transcendent and prosaic realms through language in the form of poetry, prayer and liturgy by “unraveling what she refers to in her poetry as ‘forged’ unifiers,” that is, “forged fictions about chronology, progress, and her location in their pictures of time” (662). In an earlier essay, “Alphabets of Unknowing: Fanny Howe’s Signature of Anonymity,” Huk clarifies that this unraveling is both akin to post-structuralism/Derridean deconstruction insofar as it “moves within the delusional confines of ‘the text’ as ‘world’ in order to contemplate ‘God’ as the *space* that underwrites writing at the same time that it interrupts it,” and, like Derrida, Howe remains “committed to speech” (66). At the same time, Huk argues that Howe diverges from Derrida and Derridean philosophers insofar as they tend to either embrace, or struggle with, the silence of apophatic or negative theology in the movement toward otherness; as a result, Howe avoids Derrida’s transhistorical, and therefore transcendent, position in his critiques of language (66). While I agree with Huk’s conclusion that Howe avoids the transcendence of transhistorical critique, my inquiry centers on the ways Howe navigates transcendence, material and social realities, and ethics.

allows me to situate Howe's poetic classification in relation to Romanticism and modernism, and partly because I consider at length Howe's serial/spiral poetry in terms of its ethical commitments and poetic lineage. As I consider Howe's classification as a poet, I am guided by the following questions: What implications does Howe's poetry have for the ethical considerations of transcendence and immanence within contemporary poetry criticism? How does her poetry deploy subjectivity, in particular, the interrelation between interiority and exteriority within the lyric subject, in order to advance ethical postlanguage lyric poetry?

Howe's Poetic Classification and the Problem of Transcendence

While various critics approach Howe's poetic classification differently, all emphasize her lyricism. Some of the commentary and the criticism on Howe tend to treat her poetry as *sui generis*. Daniel Kane notes that, while Language school poets have credited her as a "colleague and influence," it is nevertheless "hard to associate Howe with a given 'school,' as her work really resists classification" (68). Other critics emphasize a certain timeless quality of her lyric voice. Paul Hoover includes Howe as "postlanguage lyric" poet because her work illustrates "the natural inclination of poetry toward sweetness and depth of expression" and the presence of subjectivity (xlvi), while poet-critic Ann Lauterbach asserts that in Howe's work, "a classical lyric voice is annealed to a spiritual quest buffeted and embattled by resisting political and social realities" (182). Other critics, meanwhile, have treated Howe's "lyric voice" by comparison to a Romantic lineage. In a brief introduction to a 1992 interview with Howe, Manuel Brito asserts that her poetry "return[s] to those early voices such as Keats, Dickinson, Yeats, Thomas," a catalogue that highlights the Romantic and often visionary inclinations in lyric poetry (97). Meanwhile, critic Albert Gelpi offers an extended comparison between Howe and Emily Dickinson. Indeed, in her writing on poetics in *The Wedding Dress*, which I will reference

throughout this chapter, Howe positions her approach within the category of lyric poetry,⁶⁷ and Howe herself admits that, in contrast to Language writers, she is “unable to free myself from the charged vocabulary of a romantic” (Brito 102).

Certainly, Howe’s engagement with poetic “transcendence” would seem to situate her in the postromantic tradition. Her engagement with transcendence and certain romantic tropes can be seen in this passage from the longer the 1985 poem, *Introduction to the World*:

There is nothing I hear as well as my name
Called when I’m wild. The grace of God
Places a person in the truth
And is always expressed as a taste in the mouth
Walking with your arms wide open (*Selected Poems* 10)

In this poetic section, from earlier in her career, Howe delineates a vision of cosmic transcendence by drawing a parallel between the lyric “I,” who expresses in a state of spiritual ecstasy, with the expedition of the first man in space, Soviet cosmonaut “Yuri Gagarin orbiting Earth.” Howe gestures to an experience of transcendence through “[t]he grace of God,” which is “always expressed,” by invoking an analogy wherein the subject literally rises above the earthly realm.⁶⁸ The text positions the speaking-subject, “Fanny,” as able to transcend her immanent subjectivity, as she “may never be found or returned.”

If one were to examine only the vision of transcendence from the passage cited above, one might conclude that Howe’s focus on the otherworldly places her squarely within the postromantic tradition. As I will demonstrate, Howe’s extensive writings address much more breadth of content, but even the inclusion of such visions of transcendence problematizes

⁶⁷ See the essay “Bewilderment” in *The Wedding Dress*, 5-23.

⁶⁸ “Yuri Gagarin: First Man in Space.” Ed. Jim Wilson. Nasa.gov. *Nasa*. 13 April 2011. Web. 29 April 2015.

Howe's easy status as an "innovative" poet, as the concept of "transcendence" has largely been denounced within twentieth and twenty-first century avant-garde poetry and poetry criticism. Poetry that exalts or enacts experiences that transcend empirical conditions, such as Romantic (Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge) or neo-romantic poetry of the sublime (Yeats, Crane), and poetry which aims to transcend contemporary social realities in order to convey eternal and ahistorical truths (T.S. Eliot), has been criticized variously as escapist, elitist, hidebound, and outdated.⁶⁹ In other words, postmodern/avant-garde poets and critics have charged poetries of transcendence for being unethical: rather than orienting towards others, the poetic enactment of "rising above" often aggrandizes the poetic subject, positions the conventional lyric subject as directly expressing thoughts and feelings that originate from a sealed interiority, and ignores or downplays social and political realities. Furthermore, postmodern critical perspectives problematize spiritual experiences that involve transcendence or mysticism, which poet and critic Elizabeth Robinson defines as "an experience of presence or union that resists rational explanation" ("Persona" 92). The emphasis on *union* within poetry of transcendence—that is, the lyric subject's sense of union with the divine or the natural world—tends to encourage the concept of a unified subject and anthropocentric worldview, contrary to poststructuralist theories that emphasize a model of decentered subjectivity. Thus, a poetry of transcendence is usually read as focusing either inwards, within an enclosed interiority, or beyond, towards the otherworldly, in contrast with a poetry of immanence that focuses outwards, towards others and things within the world. Thus transcendence would present a problem for the contemporary experimental poet who approaches religious or spiritual experiences of transcendence; as Robinson remarks, "[a] transcendent mystical experience, it would seem, is no longer available

⁶⁹ See Charles Altieri, "The Objectivist Tradition"; Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice*; Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*.

to the postmodern poet” (“Persona and the Mystical Poem” 92).⁷⁰ Within postmodern critical and cultural contexts, how can a poet, such as Howe, develop religious poetry that is at once innovative, spiritually engaged, ethically deployed, and socially relevant?

A productive way to address the issue of Romantic/lyric transcendence in Howe’s poetry is to acknowledge the other major poetic lineage that Howe draws upon, which is modernism. By surveying examples of Howe’s poetry and poetics, Howe ultimately puts the lyric tradition, including Romantic strains of lyricism, in conversation with modernism. Indeed, other critics emphasize Howe’s innovative techniques as revealing a modernist influence. For example, Paul Green also compares Howe positively with Dickinson—whom he situates in the modernist canon—and emphasizes their shared poetic process of “*hiding*,” while at the same time observing Howe’s similarity to the American modernist William Carlos Williams (57). Similarly, Wills notes that the attention Howe pays to poetic measure illustrates her indebtedness to Williams, although she also concedes Howe’s expressive lyricism (126). Most relevant for my project is Romana Huk’s brief observation that one of Howe’s poetic predecessors can be identified as the American Objectivist poets of late modernism, particularly George Oppen (667).⁷¹ Building on Huk’s observation, I suggest that it is fruitful to consider Howe’s work as a syncretic hybrid of postromantic/lyric and modernist/innovative poetry—in particular, the type of modernist poetry written by the Objectivists, an avant-garde American poetic movement that began in the 1930s and continued through the mid-twentieth century. Although their reach was initially limited in scope, the writings of the Objectivists have ultimately become an influential force within multiple innovative American poetic movements.

⁷⁰ In “Persona and the Mystical Poem,” Robinson argues that, contrary to this understanding, postmodern poetry can approach issues of transcendence, and she explores such possibilities in her analysis of Jack Spicer’s poetry.

⁷¹ Huk mentions Oppen as a precursor to Howe in specific reference to both poets’ shared influence of phenomenological theologian Jean-Luc Marion.

Sincerity, Ethics, and the Objectivist Nexus

Howe's *poethics*, in terms of a deployment of lyric subjectivity that emerges through the processes of perception and encounter, can be illuminated by reading her work as participating in what Peter Quarterman and Rachel Blau DuPlessis call the "nexus" of American Objectivist poetry. In positioning Howe in the Objectivist lineage, I not only expand upon Huk's comparison between Oppen and Howe but also draw on the work of Tim Woods, who maps twentieth century American poetry in terms of the "Objectivist coalition" and the emergence of diverse trajectories of "new ethical poetics" ("Ethical Diversity" 453). Woods' poetic genealogy aims to counter-balance the conventional critical narrative's emphasis on modernist formal innovation by investigating an "*ethics of form*" and excavating a "discourse of *responsibility*" (*Poetics* 1, italics his). In his survey of twentieth century American poetry, Woods insists upon the centrality of Objectivism, a late modernist poetic movement which adopts and redefines the developments of earlier modernist poetry (such as collage and the inclusion of "non-poetic" materials) while developing "a powerful utopian and ethical vision . . . of openness to unimagined possibilities" that "call for a radical transformation of the present" (*Poetics* 2, 10). While tracing various Objectivist trajectories through many American twentieth century poetic movements, including the Beats, the Projectivist/Black Mountain school, the New York school, ethnopoeitics, and the Language school, Woods' ethical framework foregrounds the recalibration of poetic subjectivity as other-oriented ("The Ethical Diversity" 454). Understanding how features of Howe's lyric poetry are shared with the earlier Objectivist poetic texts of George Oppen can illuminate the ethical foundations of her writings and her deployment of a postlanguage lyric subject as that which is preserved "while respecting the difference of the (other) object" (Woods, *Poetics* 11).

Howe's work shares with Oppen's multiple dimensions that have ethical implications: much of their poetry operates on the Objectivist principle of sincerity, they share similar formal strategies with the use of the serial poem, and they both search for an "ethic for living" that dwells in doubt of, and resistance toward, received ideologies. Furthermore, unlike certain strains of later Language writing, Objectivist poetry does not deny interiority, for it explores the poet's perceptions, feelings, and thought processes. Both Oppen and Howe retain the lyric subject as a perceiving and conscious agent that emerges through the dynamic interplay with others and things in the world. While the lyric subject in their texts register an interior dimension, this kind of deployment of the lyric "I" is ethical in its fundamental turn towards the other.⁷² Whereas Howe's work departs from Oppen's in that it is overtly rooted in her Catholic faith, her exploration of spiritual and mystical experiences does not run counter to Oppen's poetics. Oppen, who is from Jewish background and is best characterized as non-observant, acknowledges that his poetic texts emerge out of "moments of conviction" (Oppen in Dembo, "The 'Objectivist' Poet" 161). Furthermore, critics, including Norman Finkelstein and Jeremy Hooker, observe that a visionary and mystical strain is present in his poetry. While Howe's often transcendental poetry would seem to depart from Objectivism, for Objectivist poetry has been read as anti-sublime and anti-transcendent, this is true only insofar as "transcendent" language is considered as embodying an ahistorical or eternal truth, completely removed from immanence. However, as I will argue, Howe's understanding of the transcendence of language, like Levinas's, is fundamentally relational: transcendence of the *interhuman* is not transcendence as

⁷² Like Woods, Critics Peter Nicholls and Matthew Grant Jenkins argue that Oppen's exploration of perception and encounter and his turn towards the other demonstrate an ethical stance that can be illuminated through the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. Both Levinas and Oppen reject a self-centered subjectivity and share a stance of orientation to the other, an acknowledgement of the other's radical alterity, a humility in the face of the other, the avoidance of the reduction of the other to recognizable and identifiable categories, and an openness to encounter with the other that allows a rupture in the poetic subject. See Peter Nicholls, "Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen," *Journal of American Studies* 31.2 (1997) 153-70. Reprinted in DuPlessis and Quartermain, eds. *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*, 24-53.

separate from immanence. Here, I follow Woods, who argues that Oppen also espouses poetry of transcendence akin to Levinas's ethical philosophy, for Oppen composes a modernist poetry of the sublime that advances a poetic language that transcendence insofar as it is relational (*Poetics* 224).

To place Howe within the Objectivist lineage is to argue for an inheritance that Howe does not recognize. In interviews and in her prose works on writing, Howe writes extensively about many intellectual influences from the fields of theology, mysticism, philosophy, as well as literature. However, when it comes to claiming an English-language poetic school or lineage, Howe demurs, stating that, rather than the notion of "influence," she prefers the concept of "correspondences" in which writers and thinkers within a certain historical era share many conceptual affinities and approach contemporaneous issues (*Winter Sun* 67). Although she acknowledges her admiration of certain English-language poets, such as the iconoclastic Romantic poet William Blake, Howe emphasizes her early love of world poetry from various traditions (Brito 103). For example, in *The Wedding Dress*, she asserts that her use of the lyric is akin to early Celtic poems of journey and pilgrimage and medieval Sufi lyric in its "wide swing between experience and transcendence" (*WD* 22). Thus, Howe's discussion of the lyric resonates with an approach like Brewster's or Blasing's, which identifies a long lyric tradition in a variety of cultures in the Western world and beyond. Further, Howe's embrace of poetry from a broad range of cultures does not preclude a likeness to American Objectivism, which, as Charles Altieri argues, follows a broader "objectivist tradition" that has sources as wide-ranging as "Sappho to Flaubert to Zen" ("The Objectivist Tradition" 32). Altieri defines the broader objectivist lyric tradition through its concentration on the poet's perception of things in the world, as opposed to the symbolist poet's *use* of objects to serve the construction of metaphors (26). Howe's anti-

symbolist poetry, in its tendency to concentrate on perceptions of things in the world, I suggest, appears to be both inspired by the broader “objectivist” lyric traditions, and also, in its formal strategies and its ethical stance, an heir to the specific American Objectivist line.

How is American Objectivist poetry characterized? The term “Objectivist,” as a proper noun, applies Altieri’s broader, non-symbolist description within the specific parameters of the twentieth century American modernist poetry that follows the Imagist poetic movement. In a pair of seminal 1931 essays that establishes the American Objectivist poetic school,⁷³ Louis Zukofsky advocates for poetry that focuses on “historical and contemporary particulars” (“Program: ‘Objectivists’ 1931” 268) in order to serve the principle of “sincerity,” which he describes as a process wherein “[w]riting occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (“Sincerity and Objectification” 273).⁷⁴ Like Imagism, Objectivism draws on the immediacy of material reality, but the principle of sincerity goes beyond Pound’s “direct treatment of the thing,” for it does not follow a straightforwardly empirical model in which the poet’s mind merely reflects the world of objects (Hatlen 42). According to Altieri, “sincerity” releases Imagism from serving a merely descriptive or empirical function by “freeing imagist techniques into methods of thought” (32). Altieri explains the principle of sincerity further:

Sincerity is usually not self-expression. Rather, it involves insistence on the surface of the poem as concerned primarily with direct acts of naming as signs of the poet’s immediate engagement in the areas of experience made present by

⁷³ In the essays, Zukofsky references himself, Charles Reznikoff, and George Oppen as Objectivist poets. They were loosely affiliated poets who lived in New York and shared similar socialist views in the 1930s; William Carlos Williams also associated with Zukofsky and, later, Lorine Niedecker and Carl Rakoski were classified as Objectivists (Woods, *Poetics of the Limit* 5).

⁷⁴ Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain reference Zukofsky’s words when they explain that “Objectivist” poetics “has come to mean a non-symbolist, post-imagist poetics, characterized by a historical, realist, antimythological worldview, one in which ‘the detail, not mirage,’ calls attention to the materiality of both the world and the word” (3).

conceiving the act of writing as a mode of attention. Sincerity involves refusing the temptations of closure—both closure as fixed form and closure as writing in the service of idea, doctrine, or abstract aesthetic ideal. Sincerity can take the form of presenting any form of direct experience—perceptions, feeling, alogical or [Charles] Olson’s post-logical movements of thought—that is intensified in the act of writing. (“The Objectivist Tradition,” 33)

According to Altieri, the Objectivist principle of sincerity is fulfilled by poetry that resists closure, and that self-consciously demonstrates the poet’s engagement with experience and the act of composition “as a mode of attention.” “Experience” is broad enough to include the poet’s perceptions, feeling, and thoughts within the act of composition, but the focus is primarily directed on otherness, not on the expression of a purely interior realm of the self.⁷⁵

An example of Objectivist sincerity occurs in Oppen’s well-known poem “Psalm” from *This in Which* (1965), whose epigraph references Thomas Aquinas’s quote “Veritas sequitur esse rerum,” that is, “Truth follows from the existence of things” (Hatlen 42). “Psalm” depicts “The wild deer bedding down— / That they are there!” and goes on to describe details of the deer: “Their eyes / Effortless, the soft lips / Nuzzle and the alien small teeth” (*CP* 78). “Psalm” illustrates the Objectivist principle of sincerity as it centers on poet’s direct act of engagement with and attention to the details of things that exist in the world: deer, eyes, lips, teeth, grass, woods. This engagement with the experiences of the natural world resists the closure of fixed form, symbolism, or the service of a rigid ideology or monolithic concept. While the text does

⁷⁵ Critic Burton Hatlen explains that, in “Sincerity and Objectification,” Zukofsky adds the following key variables to poetic perception and composition with Objectivist poetry: the centrality of the poet’s ethical responsibility when knowing, seeing, and therefore acting upon the world; the recognition of desire, that is, the acknowledgment that “[o]ur minds . . . want to lay hold upon things that make up the world”; “a sense of historical process,” in which things of the world exist in dynamic relation within history; and the understanding that language is not a transparent, neutral medium, for words themselves are material particulars that help make up the world (42-43).

not focus on self-expression, it registers the poet's presence through his perceptions and thought processes. The near repetition and awed starkness of the lines "That they are there!" and "They who are there," comments upon the mystery, indeed, the miracle of the deer's existence; choice adjectives chronicle the alterity of the "strange" woods and the deer's "alien" small teeth. The lines in the final verse, "The small nouns / Crying faith" displays a consciousness of composition and an awareness of language as medium that is far from neutral or precise,⁷⁶ for it, in fact, rests upon a desire to know the things of the world and a belief in language—as "small" and inadequate as it is—to approach such an experience.⁷⁷

The poetic principle of sincerity is linked to the Objectivists' ethical stance. Ethics is central to Oppen's poetics in particular.⁷⁸ Alan Golding argues that Oppen "sees his poetry as an effort to formulate an ethic for living" (227), and sincerity is linked to this pursuit, for, as Blau du Plessis and Quartermain state, "[f]or Oppen, sincerity is above all an ethical term" (9). As Oppen argues in an essay on poetics, poetic perception and encounter are central to poetics of sincerity: "It is possible to find a metaphor for anything, an analogue: but the image is encountered, not found; it is an account of the poet's perception, of the act of perception; it is a test of sincerity, a test of conviction, the rare poetic quality of truthfulness" ("The Mind's Own Place" 31). Oppen's poetics of sincerity observe how metaphor can be ethically problematic

⁷⁶ Oppen comments on language's opacity in his 1968 volume, *Of Being Numerous*, where he states "Words cannot be wholly transparent" (186). Moreover, the Objectivist emphasis on materiality of language is also evident in a 1968 interview, in which Oppen offers his own definition for another key Objectivist term, "objectification," as "the making an object of the poem" (Oppen in Dembo 160).

⁷⁷ This poem's title, "Psalm," the reference to Thomas Aquinas's notion of "Truth" following existence, the explicit reference to faith, and the implicit references to mystery demonstrate what Oppen calls "moments of conviction." In an interview, when Dembo asks him, "What exactly is the faith?" Oppen replies, "Well, that the nouns do refer to something; that it's there, that it's true, the whole implication of these nouns; that appearances represent reality, whether or not they misrepresent it: that this in which the thing takes place, this thing is here, and that these things do take place" (163).

⁷⁸ Critics have identified characteristics of Oppen's (and the Objectivists') poethics to include the following tenets: a resistance to the power dynamics of the status quo; an other-orientation vs. a universalist orientation; and the function of poetry "as a force of witness based on careful and impersonal attention to socially expressive particulars" (Altieri "Transformations of Objectivism," 314).

because it can signal the imposition of the poet's mind on an object or person. Instead, Oppen insists on the centrality of the "act of perception." "Psalm" can serve as an illustrative example: the "quality of truthfulness,"—Aquinas's "Veritas"—that follows the existence of things emerges as the result of the poet's perception of the deer, not a poetic quest to "find" a metaphor and then craft a representation out of their likeness to another thing. Moreover, Oppen makes a distinction between *finding* and *encountering* an image; rather than sought out, the "image," or poetic representation, is to be directly rooted in the experience of encounter "with things as they exist." Oppen's poetics of sincerity strives for the ethical actions of poetic perception and encounter with things in the world, and it rejects poetry in which images and metaphors convey the controlling imposition of the poet's mind.

Howe's poetry can be situated within the Objectivist nexus, for many of her poetic texts fulfill the Objectivist principle of sincerity that is evident in Oppen's "Psalm." For example, a passage from early in the serial poem, *Poem From a Single Pallet*, first published in 1980 and excerpted for *Selected Poems* in 2000, Howe includes a description of a natural landscape, full of wildflowers:

The wildness of the flower is all in the tone

Where the yellow goldenrod's a chirrup

When its chaperone is sleeping, Queen Anne's Lace

Appears beside chicory, seemingly for beauty's sake

This passage demonstrates how the speaking subject engages with an experience, establishes the act of writing as a mode of attention, and comments on the process of lyric composition. The landscape is observed directly, for while there are metaphors such as the dormant "chaperone"

and the “the thistle factory” that the bees travel to, the flowers, bees and rocks are named directly and are not symbols that stand in for other ideas. Yet the text is not description alone, for it comments on the process of lyric composition and the materiality of language—that is, language is material, with both visual and aural qualities. In particular, the text calls attention to lyric as a synthesis of sight and sound with the phrases “the goldenrod’s a chirrup” as well as the references to the audible and the voice in the following lines:

It’s audible, if you see it—

color & strain of voice, among purples
an indifferent shoulder (rocks) raised to dim

the passionate voice (2)

Furthermore, the floral wildness in the opening line depends on the “tone,” a term that can signify both visual and aural characteristics. The insistence on the marriage of sound and sight underscores the synesthesiac experience of both the *composition* of lyric poetry, where perception through the poet’s open senses—vision and hearing—transforms into song, and in the process of *reading* lyric poetry (aloud), in which the acts of seeing a visual text and hearing its sonic effects are combined. “It’s audible, if you see it” also establishes the text’s consciousness of writing as a mode of attention. As with the Objectivist emphasis on “the detail, not mirage,” Howe’s text insists that the poet can perceive the things of the world more clearly through a devoted attentiveness. Moreover, the phrase “seemingly for beauty’s sake” demonstrates the gap between the landscape as it exists and as it could seem to exist according a lyric poet’s aesthetic

ideal; this phrase thus illustrates Howe's resistance to aestheticize the scene by the imposition of the poet.

This poem also demonstrates sincerity and an ethical, other-orientation through its formal lack of closure: like Oppen's "Psalm," it uses short, spare lines and rejects fixed form.

Furthermore, Howe's passage avoids the finality of ending punctuation, encouraging an open-ended reading experience. This openness is further underscored by the use of considerable white space around the unrhymed couplets, which encourages meditative pauses in its reading.

Additionally, movement is present, for this passage presents an evanescent experience—the month of October is approaching, the blooms will fade with the change of the season, “the passionate voice” of the final line is soon to be darkened by the shadows of “an indifferent shoulder (rocks)” —which brings the passage of time and, therefore, dynamism, rather than stasis, into the description of a natural scene. There is also a lack of closure on the level of meaning; the text invites the reader to participate in this process of attentiveness rather than insisting on one monolithic interpretation of the landscape's description. The invocation of “you,” the reader, who is beckoned to discern the “passionate voice”—that is, to see *and* hear it—highlights both the consciousness of the composition process and the reader's role as active participant. I suggest that Howe's openness of form and content, as well as her use of the vocative, indicates an ethical use of poetic language in its other-orientation. Otherness is present in its exploration of exteriority and its address to the reader perception. This section of *Poem from a Single Pallet* demonstrates Howe's fulfillment of the Objectivist principle of sincerity in its exploration of “things as they exist,” the awareness of composition as mode of attention, and the rejection of closure.

At the same time, the inclusion of “the passionate voice” serves as an example of Howe’s stated use of the “charged vocabulary of romanticism.” The phrase indicates tropes that are associated with conventional lyric—both intensity of emotion and the emphasis on the singular lyric “voice,” which, at the time of this poem’s original publication, was much disparaged in Language writing’s critiques of the “voice” poem. Yet, in another mixture of auditory and visual descriptors, “an indifferent shoulder (rocks)” rises “to dim / the passionate voice”; in its appearance, the exterior world subdues the still-present lyric voice. Thus, with the inclusion and reduction of the “passionate voice,” this excerpt from Howe’s earlier work both illustrates her lyric roots and provides an example of how she puts the principles of modernism/Objectivism in conversation with Romantic lyricism.

Objectivism and Lyric Subjectivity

In its resistance to a controlling poetic egotism, the ethics of poetic sincerity surface in the Objectivists’ critique of conventional lyric subjectivity. They resist the imperialistic “lyrical ego” that is present in certain strains of Romantic poetry or expressive, neo-romantic poetry (Du Blassis and Quartermain 6). Unlike the Romantic or neo-romantic poetry that turn towards the subject, the focus is neither on the imaginative faculties of the poet nor on real-life narratives from the poet’s life. As Woods argues (referencing the poetry of another Objectivist, Zukofsky), Objectivist poems can be read “not as an autobiographical portrait of the poet but as the activity of reading and writing one’s life as an open-ended development” (*Poetics* 165). In Objectivist poetry, the presence of the lyric subject emerges through dynamic interplay with others and things in the world and the process of composition. As Oppen remarks, “the data of experience ... is the core of what ‘modernism’ has restored to poetry, the sense of the poet’s self among things,” (“The Mind’s Own Place” 32) and this relationality is evident in the opening lines of

1968's *Of Being Numerous*: "There are things / We live among 'and to see them / is to know ourselves'" (*Collected Poems* 147). To Oppen, the self can only be accessed through its relations to others. Thus, his project aims to restore a relational ethic to poetry and a poetic subjectivity that espouses an other-orientation.

Both Oppen and Howe resist dominant, ego-centric accounts of subjectivity within American culture and poetry. In *Of Being Numerous*, Oppen critiques the individualistic values espoused in American culture, including the heroism of the self-sufficient figure. Oppen instead reads the solitary figure as baffled by catastrophe—"Obsessed, bewildered / By the shipwreck / Of the singular"—or lifeless—"The isolated man is dead, his world around him exhausted" (*CP* 151, 152). In resistance to a poetry that champions individualism, Oppen seeks value in participation among others: "We have chosen the meaning / Of being numerous" (*CP* 151). Oppen's poetic subject—here, the plural "we"—insists on the value of being one of many, participating in, but not controlling, a greater collective or "unmanageable pantheon," in an experience that is an "Occurrence, a part / Of an infinite series" (*CP* 148, 147). Howe's poetic subject also extends to Oppen's "numerous" and "infinite series" with her affirmation in the poem "Kneeling Bus" from *On the Ground* (2004): "Hello air / infinity is colonizing my mind" (55). Rather than the imperial lyric ego, Howe's poetic subject is the one colonized, shaped and informed by things and others in the world. Like Oppen's, Howe's poetic subjectivity is ethically deployed as it is within dynamic interplay among things of the world, rather than a controlling ego.

In addition to their shared resistance to the dominant cultural narratives of individualistic heroism, both poets resist the cultural scripts advanced by psychoanalysis and psychologically-informed Confessional poetry. Oppen's poetry challenges what he sees as the mid-twentieth century cultural affirmation of self-absorption, perpetuated by psychologically driven

understandings of the subject. In “World, World-” from *This in Which*, Oppen advances a critique of 1960s era confessionalism by rejecting psychoanalysis as a trend whose “soul-searchings” are “prescriptions” dictated by the medical establishment. To Oppen, this “medical faddism” encourages a self-absorption that amounts to an “attempt to escape” through a self-indulgence that is fundamentally narcissistic, “To lose oneself in the self.” In contrast, Oppen states,

The self is no mystery, the mystery is
That there is something for us to stand on.

We want to be here.

The act of being, the act of being

More than oneself. (*CP* 143)

Oppen asserts that soul-searching is a misguided attempt to uncover “mystery,” or experience that meets the limits of the rational. While Oppen embraces the exploration of mystery, he critiques the direction of current poetic inquiry and aims to re-direct it towards experience of the world. This rejection of soul-searching inwardness does not only advance a cultural critique but also articulates a poetic stance as well. In resistance to the psychoanalytic culture and Confessional poetry in which, according to Oppen, lyric subjectivity loses itself “in the self,” Oppen positions the lyric “I” in relation to and among others and things with an emphasis on “The act of being / More than oneself.”

Similarly, Howe rejects Confessional and postconfessional poetry for what she sees as the inert attributes of “static, fixed-place poems with a confessional personal base” (*WD* 21). Furthermore, Howe resists reduction of the self to psychoanalytic categories. She remarks to

Brito that she “chose to break away from a Freudian and psychoanalytic vocabulary,” in exchange for a language of theology that she finds more freeing (102). It is crucial to note, however, that Howe defines “freedom” not as autonomy, but, in part, as including “a lightness, a sense of relationship to nature and society which is balanced and non-dominating” (Brito 102-3). Howe comments on what she sees as the confinement of psychological categories in the title poem of *On the Ground*: “Terrified of being first? / of being dirt? / Of being ambushed or embossed? Personally / I want to batter my way out of this cage of psychology” (34). To Howe, the language of psychology imprisons through the act of embossing, that is, the imprinting of permanent classifications on individuals through language. Whereas Oppen’s poem characterizes psychoanalysis and confessional poetry as an attempt to escape, and Howe’s characterizes them as immobilizing, the critiques of both Oppen and Howe similarly reject the dominant psychoanalytic paradigm of subjectivity, for it limits one’s ethical engagement within the world. In resistance to received ideologies and dominant poetic trends, both Oppen and Howe explore poetry in order to participate more fully, freely, and ethically within a larger community.

Ethics and Form: Serial Poetry, Spiral Movement, and Howe’s Poetics of Bewilderment

After noting what cultural and poetic scripts of subjectivity that Oppen and Howe reject, I now turn to consider, what type of poetic subjectivity do they advance, and how is it deployed within their poetic texts? Altieri suggests that the Objectivist poets’ deployment of poetic subjectivity is ethical in that the “compositional acts themselves articulate a relational ethics” (Altieri 314). In Oppen’s case, the resistance to egoistic poetic subjectivity is enacted in his frequently chosen form of the serial poem. Oppen uses serial form to enact, in Woods’ words, the “activity of reading and writing” experiences with others and things in the world as “an open-ended development.” A serial poem is a sequence of short, untitled lyric poems grouped under a

shared title. Although “series” implies linear development, Oppen eschews coherent narrative or structures to order his serial poems, and thus rejects earlier modernist poetic attempts to order fragments through mythopoesis, as in the seminal works by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.⁷⁹ In contrast to the domineering practice of mythopoesis, Oppen investigates the “problems of collective identity,” resists the egoistic imposition of order on exteriority, and examines the self’s relations to other as ongoing processes (243). These concerns are enacted formally; Oppen’s poetic lines are spare and use little punctuation. Thus the serial poem, on both the structural and linear levels, resists closure and therefore exemplifies the Objectivist ideal of “open form” rather than form as “controlling imposition” (Altieri, “The Objectivist Tradition” 33).

The form of the serial poem is also noteworthy as it is an interface between the short form of the lyric and the longer form of the epic poem. As Golding argues, in Oppen’s work, the serial poem allows for an ethical function that traditional deployments of both the lyric and the epic tend to inhibit; whereas the short lyric formally tends towards closure and tidy resolve, epic poets aim to alter the will of a people through a totalizing vision (90, 88). Conversely, Golding reads the “disjointed structure” of Oppen’s serial poem as what “results from his perceiving and writing in isolated ‘moments of conviction.’ The term ‘conviction’ implies . . . that he sees his poetry as an effort to formulate an ethic for living” (90). Furthermore, Golding reads the form of Oppen’s serial poems as inhabiting a dialectical movement that enacts the relationality of the subject, for “the relationship between particular fragment and overall series” reflect “an epistemological and social dilemma, that of the relationship between individual and community” (91). With the form of the serial poem, Oppen’s poetic texts enact the ethical deployment of the poetic subject who does not seek to control either the text or the larger world around him;

⁷⁹ Nicholls characterizes mythopoesis as egoistic because “the self’s relation to the other is generally construed as one of domination and is characterized by discontinuity and separateness” and Pound, in particular, “came to invest more and more heavily in a unitary model of social process” that resonates with his fascist politics (242, 43).

instead, the poetic subject emerges as an individual always influenced by and interacting within a larger community. When Oppen asserts that his poetry emerges from “moments of conviction,” this statement indicates that the poetic subject has values that guide his efforts to live ethically, but such conviction emerges and forms through time and within specific contexts; thus it resists rigid dogmas or abstracted ideologies.

Like Oppen, Howe frequently uses the formal strategy of the serial poem, and, similarly, her use of form enacts an ethical deployment of poetic subjectivity. Howe’s own “disjointed” lyric sequences similarly resist both the closure of personal, narrative-based short lyric and the “controlling imposition” of myth that occurs in both traditional and modernist variations of epic poetry. Indeed, Howe affirms that she “hate[s] myths” and tends to resist symbolic writing (Brito 103). Similarly, Howe’s style tends to be spare and stripped-down, and, like Oppen, many of her poetic lines are short and use little punctuation, thus also resisting closure. Thus, like Oppen, Howe deploys the serial poem to advance an ethical articulation of lyric poetry.

Despite their similarities, Howe’s use of the serial poem form is not identical to Oppen’s. Howe theorizes her use of the serial poem as a “spiral poem,” that is, a use of form that enacts the non-linear development of the subject’s *perception* of experience. The form of the serial/spiral poem is an essential element to what she calls the “poetics of bewilderment” in *The Wedding Dress*. To Howe, “[l]anguage, as we have it, fails to deal with confusion” and, thus, “bewilderment begins to form, for me ... an actual approach, a way—to settle with the unresolvable” through language (14). Within the poetics of bewilderment, lyrical movement, change, and disorientation are essential to perceive the world anew by collapsing reference within language (15). To Howe, the spiral poem is able to enact the “whirling that is central to bewilderment” in language; further, bewilderment is “the natural way for the lyric poet ... Each

poem is a different take on an idea, an experience, each poem is another day, another mood, another revelation, another conversion” (18). To Howe, the spiral poem is connected to the processes of the lyric subject perceiving and interpreting experience through time. While typical uses of language are beholden to before-and-after sequencing, the spiral allows language to demonstrate that “[m]entally, an effect precedes its cause because the whole event needs to unravel in order for it all to be interpreted. The serial poem attempts to demonstrate this attention to what is cyclical, returning, but empty at its axis. To me, the serial poem is a spiral poem” (17). Howe’s concept of the spiral poem, situated within the “poetics of bewilderment,” is rooted in her value of itinerancy and her rejection of stasis, fixed certainty, dualisms, and “monolithic answers” (WD 15, 20). While a “series” may imply linear progress, Howe’s emphasis on spiral movement resists both the concept of linearity and contemporary culture’s teleological model for progress and closure. Instead of poetry as a simple linear progression, Howe draws on models of nomadic journey or wandering to convey whirling or spiraling movement with no closure or fixed *telos*.

Howe’s model of the serial/spiral form, situated within her poetics of bewilderment, ties directly to her conceptualization of lyric subjectivity. In her writing, Howe distances her autobiographical person from the lyric “I” in her poems. In several writings she uses the designation “Q” from the Latin term “Quidam,” or “one unknown,” to refer to the “strange whoever who goes under the name of ‘I’ in my poems,” and she even titles a serial/spiral poem *Q* (*Wedding Dress* 20, 6; “*Q*” in *Selected Poems*, 17-30). Furthermore, Howe likens her poetic approach to medieval Sufi lyric poetry, where “the author is at one level empty of personality, a limited observer of his own isolation, and at another he is awake and interpreting” (22). Indeed, Howe gestures to the emptiness of the lyric “I” in “Kneeling Bus,” from *On the Ground* when

she indicates, “I am no one” (63). Furthermore, in her writing on poetics, Howe emphasizes the passage of time and the dynamism and fluidity of the “unknown” lyric subject: “Q—the Quidam, Whoever, the unknown one—or I, is turning in a circle and keeps passing herself on her way around, her former self, her later self” (*The Wedding Dress* 20). Howe asserts the centrality of movement and dynamism to the “I”—or “Q”—indeed, the spiral movement that whirls around the subject, but without the closure of a perfect circle. Considered through the movement of a spiral, the subject is modified, reconsidered, and changing through time and space. Howe elaborates further on the lyric “I” in her commentary on sequences of lyric poetry: “Sequences of lyrical poems have the heave, thrill, and murmur of the nomadic heart. Though they may at first look like static, fixed-place poems with a confessional personal base, they hold the narrator up as an idea, even an abstract example, of consciousness shifting in its spatial locations” (*The Wedding Dress* 21). Howe explicitly distances her use of the lyric “I” from that of Confessional poetry, which she identifies with both personal content and stasis. Instead, Howe embraces the idea of lyric poetry as “nomadic,” and likens her approach instead to early Celtic poetry, where the lyric “never went as high as myth, but never went as low as the purely personal, in describing the harrowing nature of pilgrimage” (*WD* 22). Moreover, to Howe, the point of the lyric is not to invite readers into a poet’s autobiography: “[a] signal does not necessarily mean that you want to be located or described. It can mean that you want to be known as Unlocatable and Hidden. The contradiction can drive the ‘I’ in the lyrical poem into a series of techniques that are the reverse of the usual narrative moments around courage, discipline, conquest, and fame” (*The Wedding Dress* 6). The enactment of wandering in Howe’s poetic texts resists the dramatic development of character and the accompanying moves of narrative climax and closure, thus further disinvents readers from a focus on poetic autobiography.

An experience of the wandering lyric subject appears in the serial poem *Forged*, first published as a chapbook in 1999 and then re-printed in the 2004 collection *On the Ground*. *Forged* uses the trope of a train journey in England to convey the lyric subject's experience of wandering. The train's motion parallels the movement of the lyric subject's consciousness as it wanders, considering various perceptions, feelings, and movements of thought. *Forged* demonstrates Howe's formal and ethical affinities with Objectivist poetry in general and Oppen's in particular. *Forged* begins by demonstrating a consciousness of the lyric subject as a textual construction. The title of *Forged* can refer to a forged item as a counterfeit production, or it could be a forged object that is created through the heat of a furnace or oven. Both senses are alluded to in the opening lyric of the sequence when she refers to "my self" as "a fiction":

sold by tickets to this trip my self
a fiction as fixed as the crucifixion
or tracks hammered into banked quarters

where logic can carry you to hell
but gives a spatial unity that in essence is emotional (3)

In this opening section, the text demonstrates what I suggest is the requisite postlanguage lyric move, that is, the use of reflexive commentary to emphasize the lyric "I" as a linguistic construction, in order to self-consciously advance, in Blasing's terms, the lyric "I" as an intending, ethical figure. Like Rankine, Howe indicates her awareness that, to deploy lyric ethically in the postlanguage moment, the text must demonstrate the distinction between the person of the author and the "I" on the page. But the lyric "I" is not the only element that is

“forged.” As with Oppen, Howe joins the poetic tradition of iconoclasm: the title and trope of the opening sequence recalls William Blake’s lament over the “mind-forg’d manacles” of the suffering populace he witnesses in his poem “London.” Howe includes a social critique by arguing that the process of self-fabrication involves the illusory notions of “fixed” self by dominant cultural notions of subjectivity. The concept of the self that is conventionally described in language is “forged,” that is, fictional, fixed into a place of permanence through the process of construction through language. She argues against this fixity, likening it, with the reference to sonic echo of “the crucifixion,” to the violent oppression of those who seek spiritual salvation. Also, with the image of “tracks hammered into banked quarters,” fixity is compared to the indelible scars in the earth by industrialization, that is, the forged materials of train tracks. The forces of fixity in both these similes include materials forged in furnaces—nails in the cross, or the railroad tracks—thus asserting that the processes of social and linguistic fixity are as hardy, indelible and destructive as the production of man-made material for both industrial development and instruments of torture. While the permanence of the train tracks enables the passengers’ physical mobility, Howe positions this material progress as ultimately leading to defeat, for the tracks are “where logic can carry you to hell.” Howe thus inveighs against the materialism and abstract rationalism of capitalist modernity that upholds the power structures of the status quo. While “logic,” or reason alone, encourages the “fiction” of a fixed self, Howe asserts that such a stance relies on an appeal to an emotionally comforting concept of “spatial unity”—that is, the idea of the subject as a coherent whole. Thus, Howe subverts the value of rationality—and the concept of coherent subjectivity built upon it—by observing that it is fundamentally irrational.

The spiral movement of *Forged* is in evidence as the poem continues, for Howe echoes these images later in the poem with reiterations of the comparison of industrialism to the crucifixion—

“It must be the case that the train / is this century’s model Cross” (18)—and the critique of predominant notions of subjectivity: “Personality likewise imitates / fakery like this” (24).

Furthermore, a passage from *Forged* theorizes this spiral movement and the development of the subject through time:

Successive déjà vus
ended then remembered
overlapping since leaving
the building materials of sequential plot

Behind time thickens and deepens (5)

While the speaker in *Forged* takes a train journey, which implies a linear journey from A to B, the text resists a linear narrative or “sequential plot,” instead recognizing how the individual subject actually considers past time as “overlapping,” thickening and deepening. Previous days spiral back to the present in the form of memory and “déjà vus.” The serial form of *Forged* indicates a spiral movement that conveys not just the lyric subject as a construction but also the subject as formed through time, created out of the interrelation between exterior and interior dimensions of the subject’s experience. In line with Howe’s emphasis on bewilderment, the spiral movement does not necessarily lead to clarity, for the concluding line, “while eyes grow blind with cosmic winds,” indicates the inevitable moments of disorientation within whirling and change.

Liberation Theology and Howe’s Poethics

Thus far, I have considered Howe’s poethics by looking at some of the formal features and informing ethics of Howe’s poetry in relation with the work of the Objectivist poet, George

Oppen. At this point, in order to delve more deeply into Howe's ethics and her articulation of postlanguage lyric subjectivity, including an exploration of subjective transcendence and interiority, I turn to consider how theology informs Howe's poethics. Howe's worldview is informed by her Catholic faith, and therefore, unlike many of her avant-garde contemporaries, her poetry is avowedly faith-based rather than secular. A key strain of Howe's theological perspective is indebted to the teachings of contemporary liberation theologians, including Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and Clovis Boff, whom Howe references as influential in the autobiographical prologues to *Introduction to the World* (1986) and *The Wedding Dress* (xii).⁸⁰ Both Wills and Huk have noted this influence on Howe. Wills alludes to liberation theology's impact on Howe in terms of her focus on the poor ("Marking Time" 131). Moreover, Huk speaks of Howe's particular version of "theology of liberation" as a syncretic, "catholic and socialist" approach that centers on the poor but avoids "engulfing otherness into the false oneness of I-ness" ("Alphabets of Unknowing" 74). However, neither critic considers Howe's poetry and ethics within the particular hermeneutics of liberation theology, the analytic task to which I turn now. I will further explore this influence on Howe's thought by providing an overview of liberationist teachings and enumerating ways that they extend to Howe's poethics.

Liberation theology is particularly relevant to consideration of Howe's poethics because it does not oppose the social and the spiritual, the exterior and the interior, the immanent and transcendent, but instead insists on their interrelation. Liberation theologians argue that the confrontation of social realities is an integral part of spiritual life, and that individuals and communities need a spiritual life to heal social ills. According to Michael Lowy and Robert Sayre, Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff argue that modern civilization, governed by

⁸⁰ In *The Wedding Dress*, Howe refers to the theologians by name, whereas, in the earlier *Introduction to the World*, she refers more generally to "A theology of liberation (Catholic and socialist)" as her "over-riding interest (or attempt)" during her months of poetry writing (9).

individualism and driven by market forces, leads to anonymity and atomization and, therefore, spiritual enervation and community disintegration (231-232). In resistance to the alienating effects of modernity, liberation theologians advance an approach to spiritual life that is rooted in community life and commitment to political action. Emerging in the 1960s and 1970s from a diverse range of South American Catholic Church communities called CEBs (“basic Christian communities”) and using an epistemology and language of solidarity that parallels Marxism, liberation theology “arises out of the specific needs and concerns of the poor,” such as struggles for rural land use and the oppressive conditions under Latin American military dictatorships (Rowland 637, 635).

Central to liberation theology is participants’ experience within specific material and historical contexts, as Christopher Rowland states: “liberation theology is a form of contextual theology, in which the experience and circumstances of the interpreters are given a prime importance as the first step in seeking to be a disciple of Jesus” (634). Rowland emphasizes that the liberationist approach extends the Catholic doctrine of incarnation to the social realities of the impoverished: “[t]he basic theological assumption undergirding this approach is that God does not come from outside such a situation but is to be found there, just as much as in the Bible, church, and tradition. . . . The fundamental hermeneutic starts from humanity, moves thence to God, and then from God back to humanity” (635). Thus, as theologian Alain Mayama observes, transcendence and immanence are interwoven, for the proponent of liberationist theology “searches for the divine transcendence in a life of commitment to the other human person” (47). The “first step” in the work of faith is to “grasp the reality of the context in which one finds oneself,” which amounts to “confronting the reality of suffering”; this step is then followed by “a stage of reflection concerning orientation towards more insightful action” (Rowland 635). While

Howe's poetic texts are not linear and do not lay out specific stages or steps of reflection as neatly as Rowland's synopsis does, this outline of liberation theology's "fundamental hermeneutic" nevertheless illuminates the spiritual and ethical dimensions of her poetry, particularly the centrality of experience and the interrelation between humanity and the divine, or what Wills calls Howe's "incarnational aesthetics."

Liberation theology's advocacy for the poor is also essential to understanding Howe's writings. Howe embraces the liberationist conviction that the marginalized offer valuable, alternative perspectives "to that told by the wielders of economic power whose story is privileged as the 'normal' account" (Rowland 637). Such alternative perspectives inform and energize political action; rather than a focus on a transcendent afterlife, liberationist approaches emphasize individuals' and communities' active agency for change in this world (Rowland 648-9). Indeed, Howe overtly traces a connection between the possibility and necessity of alternative perspectives with the suffering of the marginalized as she links her poetics of bewilderment to its attendant "politics of bewilderment": "[t]he politics of bewilderment belongs only to those who have little or no access to an audience or a government. It involves circling the facts, seeing the problem from varying directions, showing the weakness from the bottom up, the conspiracies, the lies, the plans, the false rhetoric; the politics of bewilderment runs against myth, or fixing, binding, and defending" (*The Wedding Dress* 22-23). To Howe, the politics of bewilderment, which is "devoted to the little and the weak," occupies a privileged position. As with the dynamism and disorientation of the poetics of bewilderment, the politics of bewilderment counters normative and hegemonic ideologies through processes of disorientation, doubt, and interrogation (23). The politics of bewilderment clearly demonstrates the influence of liberation theology on Howe's thinking. In turn, Howe's poetic texts indicate a liberationist approach by

the presence or trace of marginalized persons, which allows for alternative locations “from which to view the way the world and the tradition are being used” (Rowland 645).

Along with overt political commitment, liberationist approaches, emerging from a focus on the impoverished, have spiritual and ethical implications that offer a redefinition of subjectivity. Liberation theology insists that the poor are not “objects of pity but subjects in their own right, with a peculiar capacity to understand the ways of God,” as Rowland explains: “the poor are particularly close to God and . . . Oppressed persons mediate God because they break down the normal egotism with which human beings approach other human beings” (645). Thus, within the framework of liberation theology, marginalized persons offer, or allow for, perceptions of experiences and relations that are distinct from those of the privileged “‘normal’ account[s]” of influential concepts, particularly subjectivity.

Furthermore, as Mayama argues, the teachings of liberation theology have significant “conceptual affinities” with the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, for they both share a fundamental turn towards the other (or neighbor), and likewise both “contribute toward a redefinition of subjectivity as ‘being-in-the-world’ for the other human person,” in distinction to the Cartesian-Kantian model of subjectivity, which relies on the model of the self-sufficient, autonomous subject (95, 45). According to Mayama, both liberationist approaches and Levinas’s ethics offer a model of subjectivity that is ethical in its other-orientation. However, in the treatment of a highly socially engaged poet like Howe, it must be noted that Levinasian ethics have been critiqued for taking a transhistorical approach. Therefore, I follow Mayama by reading Levinas’s ethics in conjunction with liberation theology in order to historicize Levinas’s turn to the other.⁸¹

⁸¹ Mayama is not alone in his efforts to apply Levinas’s ethics to specific, historical contexts. Closely related to Mayama’s argument for the application of Levinas to liberation theology is the work of Enrique Dussel, a Latin American political theorist who both critiques Levinas for delivering only an “anti-politics” as “*negative critique*” while asserting that Levinasian thought could be positively applied to a Third World philosophy of Liberation (91).

I argue that a model of subjectivity, based on both Levinasian and liberationist thought, as “‘being-in-the-world’ for the other human person” can illuminate the ethical deployment of the lyric subject in Howe’s poetic texts. This model of subjectivity, Levinasian and liberationist, applied to Howe’s postlanguage lyric poetry, thus adds a theological dimension to the Levinasian-Celanian model of postlanguage lyric poetry that I advance in chapter two.⁸² In its liberationist approach, the subject’s openness to the Other concentrates on the alterity of marginalized individuals who are abject and suffering. Howe’s lyric poetry explores experiences in which the lyric subject encounters the presence or the trace of marginalized persons. These experiences allow for an ethical deployment of the lyric subject, for in the subject’s “break down of normal egotism,” subjectivity as other-oriented, rather than self-centered, emerges.⁸³

As several examples from Howe’s primary texts will demonstrate, Howe’s poetry often addresses what can be considered political issues from a stance of resistance to the status quo. Indeed, the liberationist thinkers Howe embraces merge the theological and the political, and the

Like Dussel, many other thinkers recognize some of problematic or conservative dimensions of Levinas’s writings and statements, including his Eurocentrism and androcentrism, but nevertheless find in Levinas’s thinking potential approaches to apply to progressive political issues. In the 2010 critical anthology *Radicalizing Levinas*, editors Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco argue that an emerging “third wave” of Levinas scholarship represents “an explicit attempt to situate and explore Levinas’s work within the context of the most pressing sociopolitical issues of our time” (x). Essays in *Radicalizing Levinas* include the following: Judith Butler’s argument that Levinas’s ethical imperative of the “face” can be used by those in the humanities employ to counter the dehumanization of certain populations within media coverage of events such as the Iraq war; Robert Eaglestone’s essay that both acknowledges Levinas’s racially insensitive remarks and asserts that postcolonial theory could benefit from Levinas’s dual registers of ethics and politics and his critique of Western metaphysical tradition’s dismissal or consumption of alterity; and Robert Bernasconi’s argument that Levinasian ethical thinking can meet the challenge of globalization by revealing the subject’s responsibility to the neighbor that surpasses narrow legal obligations. For perspectives critical of Levinas’s politics, see Howard Caygill’s *Levinas & the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002) which critiques the centrality of monotheism and the idealization of Israel in Levinas’s thought, and Gad Horowitz’s Marxist-oriented criticism that reads Levinas’s (and Derrida’s) emphasis on “impossible justice that arrives by never arriving” as a tacit endorsement of the “Western status quo” that opposes (Marxist) revolution (310).

⁸²As I observe towards the end of this chapter, Howe, too, invokes Celan’s poetics and poetry in her writings, specifically in her essays on poetics. I suggest that Howe’s reliance on Celanian ideas of extension towards the reader are implicit in her poetry.

⁸³Thus my reading of Howe’s lyric subject differs somewhat from Huk’s. Whereas Huk sees Howe as poststructuralist but moving beyond deconstruction in her refusal of its transhistorical positioning, my argument aims to reconcile these two countering impulses in Howe’s writings with Mayama’s liberationist/Levinasian model of the subject.

“politics of bewilderment” that she avows, which is “devoted to the little and the weak,” is also informed by the thinking of political philosophers, including Franz Fanon, Ivan Illich, and Paulo Freire (*The Wedding Dress* 22, 23, xi). At the same time, in my literary-ethical inquiry of Howe’s texts, I must make a distinction between a critical reading that focuses on political dimensions and one that highlights ethics. This is difficult in Howe’s case, as her poethics merge so thoroughly with her political stance. To distinguish between a political reading and an ethical one, I rely on Jenkins’ distinction, as outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, that “ethics does not coincide with what poststructuralists would call *the political* ... because ethics for them is in essence the limit of power, not the archaeology of its workings” (7). While my readings of Howe’s poetry acknowledge her interest in the archaeology of the workings of power, I aim to emphasize how Howe also focuses on the limits of power and the ethical solutions afforded by a textual modeling of ethical subjectivity, the productive potential in encounter with the alterity of marginalized persons, and a recalibration of the (lyric) subject’s perception.

Perception and Encounter in Howe’s Poetry

Like the liberation theology that informs her thinking, Howe’s texts are rooted in experience of the world. In order to understand Howe’s ethical deployment of subjectivity, it is therefore crucial to investigate how her texts approach experience. In her writings, Howe insists that ideas about experience are mediated by socioeconomic and historical contexts, especially race, class and gender. Indeed, while her poetry does not often foreground the particulars of her personal life, Howe’s worldview is very much informed by her lifetime commitments to work in social justice, beginning as a civil rights activist in the late 1960s (a commitment she affirms as an inheritance from her father), her early marriage to an African-American activist, and her

experience in raising biracial children as a single mother in economically straitened circumstances (*The Wedding Dress* ix-xxvi).

While, on one level, Howe's biography and politically-informed stance informs how she considers experience, it is important to note that Howe's poetic texts do not claim to mirror empirical reality directly, nor do they present experience as static and easily assimilated to the subject's mind. Instead, as I mentioned in my earlier discussion of Oppen, Howe's poetry explores the processes of *perception* of experience.⁸⁴ Like Oppen before her, Howe's interest in perception is rooted in another deep influence on her thinking, phenomenology, which can be broadly defined as the study of conscious experience. Huk asserts that Howe advances "a/theological poetics," which she defines as an "'a theological' poetics written against itself . . . or rather, written in a phenomenological mode, bracketing perception against preconceptions about the matter at hand" ("A simple liturgy" 658). By tracing the intellectual influences Howe discusses in *The Wedding Dress*, including the phenomenological religious writers Thomas Aquinas, Simone Weil, and Edith Stein, Huk observes how Howe develops a phenomenologically-informed theology, one that insists that "the *work* of faith requires continued doubt and questioning" (659).⁸⁵ Huk notes that, for Howe, doubt is the "pivot of her ethics, her politics" because "[d]oubt dissolves our defenses, or at least those protective of the self, opening spaces of potentiality enabled by the kind of empathy that welcomes the as-yet-

⁸⁴ Oppen was also influenced by phenomenology; hence, many of observations I make about Howe's focus on perception and experience resonate with Oppen's work as well.

⁸⁵ Other critics also delve into the phenomenological dimensions of Howe's poetry, and the influence of phenomenological thinkers such as Weil and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but their explorations do not treat Howe's deployment of subjectivity as directly as Huk's does. Rusty Morrison reads Howe through the lens of the Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to argue that "Howe is a poet who . . . would make of language a means to hear what is muted within our contact with things, the prelogical bond preceding our pre-established roads of signification" (89). Peter Middleton also refers to Merleau-Ponty's thinking about flesh as an "'element' of Being" in part of his reading of Howe's oeuvre (91). Furthermore, Kit Fan focuses on Simone Weil's influence on Howe to argue, in her reading of the serial poem *The Quietest*, that Howe uses "Weil's notions of silence, doubt and bewilderment to 'forge' her own 'rhetoric of faith'" (133). Finally, Ann Vickery, also reads Howe's poetry in *The End* through the "social and spiritual philosophies of Simone Weil" although her focus is not on Weil's phenomenological explorations but on "the role of gender in embodied thought" (143).

unformulated, the unknown” (673). According to Huk, “Howe’s *post*-Thomistic, *post*-postmodern, even *post*-phenomenological return to concentration on ‘the writing subject’ and its perceptions finally results in a newly expanded and *outgoing* rather than traditionally self-centered or self-seeking consciousness” (679). While aiming to reject rigid certainty and preconceived notions (Huk 663), Howe’s doubt and phenomenological exploration allows for the opening of *perceptions* of the world. The poetry’s ongoing work of continually perceiving the world anew, beyond the dictates of common sense or fixed ideologies, advances a postlanguage lyric “I” that is ethical rather than egoistic.

In addition to Howe’s phenomenological focus on *perception* that Huk outlines, my inquiry considers instances of ethical encounter with exteriority in Howe’s texts. Encounter is crucial to understanding Howe’s ethical deployment of the lyric subject because ongoing, dynamic interactions with exteriority—human others and the material world—influence and shape the subject’s interiority. As Howe describes in *The Wedding Dress*, the dynamic lyric subject of her poetry strives to achieve a condition of openness towards the other and a phenomenological recognition of desire for—or intentionality toward—exteriority: “[t]he taste and smell of an action, any action, comes from its objective. This is the strange thing about relationship. What you desire is what creates your quality. You are not made by yourself, but by the thing that you want. It is that sense of a mutually seductive world that an itinerant life provides . . . you are always watching and entering . . .” (110). While “watching” indicates experiences of perception, “entering” indicates experiences of encounter; the subject does not merely observe others and things in the material world, as if from a distance, but meets and engages with others. Encounter, as a counterpart to perception, involves the “action” that Howe discusses so frequently in *The Wedding Dress*. The subject cannot be self-created, for it is shaped

through his or her desire for and objective—that is, the intention—towards the other. Furthermore, as Howe’s value of an “itinerant life,” and her use of progressive terms, “watching” and “entering,” indicate, experiences of attentive *perception* and *encounter* entail ongoing processes rather than static conditions. Howe’s recognition of the ongoing process of self-creation through the subject’s intention toward exteriority can be illuminated by its correspondences to Levinas’s phenomenological ethics, his emphasis on face-to-face encounter, and his definition of subjectivity as hospitality. As Mayama contends, Levinasian encounter is an occurrence of everyday contact with infinity in the alterity of the Other who is suffering resonates with liberation theology, and, I suggest, with Howe’s postlanguage lyric poetry.

Another example from the serial poem *Forged* illustrates how Howe explores the processes of perception and a textual enactment of an ethical encounter in the description of an indigent man. In the poem, the lyric subject is on a train journey in England in the winter, when she perceives an image she cannot initially decipher:

Pitch in a pot in the alley a board
a leaning rod a thrown cloth
seems to signify a man huddled but faceless
a thick ruined guest with his paper cup
extended torn sneakers (8)

Howe’s concentration on perception in this passage moves from a misperception to the recognition of limited perception, to an encounter with the Other. Initially, the text describes an ad hoc assemblage of rubbish which “seems to signify a man huddled but faceless.” At first, the speaker sees humanity within bits of garbage, but she realizes that this is based in misrecognition. The passage then proceeds ambiguously: at first, the speaker appears to continue

to describe an indigent man that the garbage pile resembles, but specific details are added that demonstrate a shift to the perception of an actual man who exerts a will and embodies a spirit. Details, such as his “his paper cup / extended torn sneakers,” convey the man’s material poverty, and his actions are both unclear—does he extend his paper cup to drink from it or to beg for money?—and decisive, for he is “reading Upanishads to each of us,” that is, sacred scriptures from Hindu traditions. The point where the poem shifts between the initial misreading of the garbage and the poet’s perception of the man remains unresolved, and as such the relation between the heap of garbage and the indigent man is ambiguous. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition between the garbage pile and the indigent man draws on commonplace cultural links between trash and members of the poverty-stricken underclass. The juxtaposition also indicates the recognition of the poet’s misperception and limited perception. The text moves from a garbage heap that seems to signify “a man huddled but faceless” to an impoverished man “reading Upanishads,” thus engaging the subject—and “each of us”—in a face-to-face encounter. Thus the movement is from the perception of mere garbage to encounter with the Other that involves the lyric subject’s recognition of humanity and presence of spirit in the midst of squalor. Significantly, Howe describes this man, despite his “ruined” class status and abject condition, in Levinasian terms of hospitality, as a “guest.” As such, he is welcomed into the space of the poem.

With the concluding line, “just seven percent of our being visible,” Howe recognizes the great limits of the speaker’s visual perception, not only through the reference to a garbage heap which initially seems to signify a man, but also the reference to the man as a spiritual being whose alterity vastly exceeds what the poet can visually perceive. In resistance to judgments of things and people based on cursory visual perceptions and, often, visual *misperception*, Howe

enacts in this passage an encounter with the other that is ethical in its openness to suffering alterity. As I discussed in my reading of Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* in chapter two, the potentially problematic nature of vision is one that Levinas describes in his ethical philosophy. The shift in this passage from *Forged*, from visual (mis)perception to hearing as the basis for an encounter with the Other resonates with the way Levinas privileges discourse and speech over vision. Levinas rejects "the notion of vision to describe the authentic relationship with the Other; it is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship" (*Ethics and Infinity* 87-88). To Levinas, "[t]he presence of the Other (*Autre*) is a presence that teaches us something" and is "fulfilled in the act of hearing" ("Transcendence of Words" 148). For Levinas, hearing is a privileged mode of perception because it involves an interrelation that avoids the reduction and/or dominance of the gaze: "to speak is to interrupt my existence as a subject and a master, but without offering myself up as a spectacle" ("Transcendence of Words" 149). Howe's text references an encounter with an indigent man that is ethical in that it avoids making him a spectacle, for, unlike the initial, "faceless" heap of garbage, Howe's text does not focus on a physical description of the Other but on his speech. Thus, in a move not unlike that of *DLMBL*, this passage indicates a move from the lyric subject as spectator consuming a spectacle to a witness engaged in response-ability and responsibility for the suffering other. While including signifiers of material poverty, the text does not reduce the indigent man to identifiable categories. Instead, Howe's description recognizes that the man's spiritual life indicates depths that are beyond what are "visible." Furthermore, the lyric subject is ruptured by the encounter with the other; the poet notes that the man is "reading Upanishads to each of us," thus emphasizing the subject's act of hearing of discourse as recognition of the presence of the Other that moves beyond "pure and simple coexistence" and becomes an ethical encounter

(“Transcendence of Words” 148). The insistence on the spirit of the indigent man that exceeds visible judgment conveys a lyric subject engaged in an ethical encounter with a suffering Other by moving from spectacle to response-ability.

Furthermore, the passage from *Forged* resonates with Levinas’s ethics in terms of its recognition of the Other’s alterity; while fact of the man’s reading can be described as evidence of his spirit, the poem’s recognition of his Otherness exceeds this attempt at categorization. The reading of Upanishads provides testimony of the infinity of the Other—an infinity that Howe approximates with the phrase “just seven percent of our being visible”—that emphasizes that the vast majority of “our being” is beyond what can be visibly perceived. In addition to its Levinasian elements, this passage illustrates Howe’s affinity with liberation theology, not only in the conviction about the dignity of the poor, but also in the idea that the poor have a distinct ability to be close to God. Indeed, this passage serves as an example of the liberationist belief that marginalized persons can “break down the normal egotism with which human beings approach other human beings” (645). The lyric subject’s recognition of her misperception of the indigent man, and the spiritual reading he provides, breaks down the lyric subject’s egotism as the alterity of the “guest” shakes her certainty of her perception. The text thus gestures to the “interior” of perception as a process influenced by encounter with the Other.

Exteriority and Interiority, Transcendence and Immanence

As stated earlier in this chapter, a crucial issue for critical consideration of the postlanguage lyric subjectivity is the question of interiority or the subject’s “inner life.” Indeed, Language writers’ criticism of the lyric “I,” rooted in poststructuralist critiques of conventional ideas of subjectivity, criticizes lyric poetry for its tendency towards expression of feelings and thoughts rooted in the lyric subject’s unique, private, and self-created interiority. Yet Howe often

speaks of the soul, and interiority and its associated activities—individual will, prayer, contemplation—are taken seriously within Howe’s poetry. On this topic, my exploration of Howe’s interior register diverges somewhat from Huk’s. While Huk accurately observes that Howe alludes to Simone Weil’s invocation of the self as involving a void or emptiness and describes Howe as acknowledging that there is no “inner life” in “our postmodern sense,” I would like to reframe the discussion by considering Howe’s recalibration of subjectivity as one that emphasizes that a subject’s interiority, including a spiritual dimension, is not only deeply important but also a site of ethical possibility. As Rae Armantrout observes, Howe’s poetry “ask[s] how to reimagine the self, the ‘inner life,’ without putting it in quotes” (43). Interiority is neither private nor sealed, but neither is it erased or bracketed. Whereas Armantrout proposes Howe’s lyric subjectivity in terms of a nomadic collectivity, however, my inquiry investigates the contours of an individual subject’s interiority as it perceives, encounters, shapes, and is shaped by exteriority.

Howe recognizes subjective interiority as continually realized *through* the equally essential, ongoing processes of perception and encounter with exteriority. In an essay on poetics in *The Wedding Dress*, Howe articulates the interrelation of a subject’s interiority and exteriority by using a dream image of two selves as two old mothers, a quiet, pensive self—“Way Inside”—and an active, public self—“Way Out There”—who are “a different embodiment of the same actual human” (8). The self that is “Way Inside” informs and is informed by the experiences of “Way Out There,” and vice versa. Howe’s dynamic, fluid subject is continually perceiving and encountering, watching and entering, continually created through the interrelation of interior and exterior, “Way Inside” and “Way Out There.” In her analysis of *O’Clock* and “Q,” Wills observes that Howe uses theology as a means of interrelating the exterior and interior of the

subject. I would like to expand upon Wills' observation with a consideration of Howe's interrelation of exteriority and subjective interiority within a Levinasian framework that emphasizes the ethical dimension of Howe's theologically-informed poetry.

In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas draws on the biblical concept of testimony to explain the subject's obligation to the Other: "[t]he tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility . . . To say: here I am. To do something for the Other. To give. To be human spirit" (97). The affirmation, "here I am," is a biblical allusion that Levinas emphasizes in his development of the concept of testimony as an ethical relation that interrelates interiority and exteriority. "Here I am" references the affirmative responses of Abraham and the prophet Isaiah to God's call (*Ethics and Infinity* 97n1), and Levinas uses the declaration "Here I am" to describe how an ethical relation develops through testimony.⁸⁶ As Levinas explains in an interview with Philip Nemo, "the subject who says 'Here I am!' *testifies* to the Infinite" for "every man, assuming responsibility for the Other is a way of testifying to the glory of the Infinite, and of being inspired" (*Ethics and Infinity* 106, 113). Levinas further discusses the relation between interiority and the exteriority of Infinity:

The idea of the Infinite . . . expresses the disproportion between glory and the present, a disproportion which is inspiration itself. Under the weight that exceeds my capacity, a passivity more passive than all passivity correlative of acts, my passivity breaks out in saying: 'Here I am!' The exteriority of the Infinite somehow becomes 'interiority' in the sincerity of the testimony. (*Otherwise than Being* 146-7)

⁸⁶ As the footnote in *Ethics and Infinity* indicates, also see *Genesis* 22.1, 22.7, 22.11 and *Isaiah* 6. 8 for biblical passages that include the phrase "Here I am!"

This interrelation between the interior and exterior means that interiority is “not a secret place somewhere in me,” but “is that reverting in which the eminently exterior . . . concerns me and circumscribes me and orders me by my own voice” (*Otherwise than Being* 147). Levinas thus describes testimony as an experience of divine revelation, in which the “infinitely exterior” commands the interior by transforming it through the voice, and the “secrecy” of the interior voice dissolves: “the infinitely exterior becomes an interior voice, but a voice testifying to the fission of the interior secrecy, signaling to the Other” (*Otherwise than Being* 147). As Levinas’s emphasis on “voice” indicates, this “signaling to the Other” takes place through speech: “[w]hen in the presence of the Other, I say ‘Here I am!’, this ‘Here I am!’ is the place through which the Infinite enters into language” (*EI* 106). Levinas adds that this concept of testimony, which involves a mode of divine revelation, is not the activity of bearing witness in an empirical sense; while it involves speech, it does not deliver knowledge as it is usually understood (107).

Levinas’s description of testimony as divine revelation can readily be applied to poetic composition, for it accords with what Robinson calls the “poetic truism that the poet is a conduit for the muse or for the spirit” (“Persona” 93). Moreover, Levinas’s concept of the interior voice transformed by the command of the exterior concurs with what Robinson articulates as an understanding of speech rooted in mystical experience: “[i]n poetry and mystical utterance, there is no necessary disagreement between the simultaneity of the speaker’s voice and the voice that arrives from outside” (Robinson 93). Levinas’s theory allows for the possibility of an understanding of mystical poetry within overtly ethical terms, for it explains testimony as a mode of divine revelation that is based on the subject’s relation to and responsibility for the Other. Levinas’s ethics can thus illuminate Howe’s spiritual poetry and her poethics. When Howe affirms, for example, in *On the Ground* (2004), “Infinity is colonizing my mind,” she not only

articulates a belief in divine revelation through the world but also references an interiority that is formed and informed by exteriority of the Other and, by extension, the Infinite (“Kneeling Bus” 55).

The interrelation of exteriority and interiority in Howe’s subject directly relates to what she sees as the link between transcendence and immanence in experience and in language. Howe’s poetry does not aim to achieve a transcendent vision or experience in some universalized, static, unbroken state that is beyond empirical reality in the sense of being severed from it. As Wills notes, Howe’s “incarnational aesthetics” assert that the transcendent and the immanent are not in opposition but are intertwined: “eternity may be glimpsed through the evanescent, unstable and momentary” (125). While I agree with Wills’ insight that Howe values the transcendent and immanent as “intertwined,” I would stress that Howe’s theological reflections are essentially ethical in their turn towards the other; a transcendent glimpse of “eternity” is not Howe’s sole poetic objective. Rather, to use Rowland’s terms, Howe draws on liberation theology’s “fundamental hermeneutic” that “starts from humanity, moves thence to God, and then from God back to humanity” (635). Furthermore, Levinas’s ethics allow a way for understanding how Howe’s poetic exploration of perception and encounter with immanence allow for a use of language that is both transcendent and ethical. Levinas’s formulation of transcendent language is ethical because it is relational. As Woods explains, in Levinas’s writings, “the transcendence of words is therefore not to be found in some eternal message they convey or ahistorical truth they embody, but in the fundamental ethical relationship—the being-for-the-other—that exceeds and overtakes any message” (224). Similarly, Howe’s poetics deploy a lyric subjectivity that is fundamentally “being-for-the other,” and her lyric subject’s move to transcendence ultimately allows an extension towards others rather than escaping into eternal

messages or a realm of pure interiority. While Howe welcomes experiences of transcendence or communion with the divine, her texts refuse the idea of transcendence as an escape from the harsh realities of social and material conditions experienced by many. Instead, experiences of transcendence that are rooted in interiority—contemplation, prayer, mystical union with the divine—serve to recharge the lyric subject in the ongoing movement from humanity to God, and back to humanity.

Howe's exploration of exteriority as interrelated with interiority, and transcendence as interwoven with immanence, is illustrated in a passage from the serial poem, "In the Spirit there are no Accidents," which also appears in *Selected Poems* (2000). It begins with the invocation of "Sister Poverty" who is "welcome[d] to my cloister," and then continues:

In the world of wretches & the exploited

Of the accidentally destroyed

The strike of each heart

In the distant body

Ups the odds that there's a why but, why (121)⁸⁷

⁸⁷ In this section, Howe cites, without attribution, the words of the poem "Sister Poverty" by Wendy Mulford, which appear in *Talisman* 16 (1996): 151. The relevant passage in Mulford's poem reads as follows:

in the world of the wretched the exploited the
wilfully the accidentally
destroyed

the strike of the heart
in a distant body
ups the odds that there's a God
but why

In a composition that appears to take the form of a call and response with Mulford's poem, Howe both draws directly on Mulford's words and alters them. In particular, where Mulford's passage interrogates the existence of God, Howe's alteration from "God" to "why" shifts from the question of God's existence to an investigation of our human understanding of possible meaning behind suffering and loss.

In this text a lyric subject emerges that, on one level, retreats to seclusion, contemplation, and prayer within a “cloister,” and thus indicates a “Way Inside” figure. But the cloistered subject invites “Sister Poverty” into this seclusion, a figure that calls to mind the Franciscan and other religious orders’ vow of voluntary poverty, or the female religious themselves. “Sister Poverty” thus synthesizes both the material reality of poverty and the experience of prayerful contemplation, and is thus akin to a blend of “Way Inside” and “Way Out There.” Thus, the subject’s contemplation and prayer is not transcendent in an escapist sense, but draws on experiences of exteriority. In particular, this encounter with exteriority involves the confrontation of the reality of suffering as realized through experience of the poor and oppressed; “the world” outside is characterized by the “wretched & exploited” and “accidentally destroyed.” Belief is invoked—namely, the Christian conviction that “each heart,” or individual member of the church (which can be, potentially, any human) is united in the “distant body” of Christ. This spiritual framework provides some hope, for it “Ups the odds that there’s a why”—that is, a reason why there is suffering in the world. Nevertheless, the lyric subject refuses such a pat solution, and concludes this final line of this section with the words “but, why.” The lack of closure in both content or punctuation in the final line indicates the speaker’s ongoing exploration of and concern with issues of poverty, social injustice, and suffering.

The exploration of the interrelatedness between interiority and exteriority, transcendence and immanence continues in the final poetic section of “In the Spirit there are No Accidents,” which concludes with a prayerful invocation of Christ, or “Son the One who was also called Sun” whom the subject implores to “Domesticate your fire and send sufficiency.” The section continues:

Zero has gathered into a hole

By the road where living gives

An atavistic echo, the bank's

A thief. And I am without

Retinue. (124)

"In the Spirit" concludes with a plea for Christ's aid to relieve the speaker's spiritual poverty.

Words that conjure primal needs for basic survival—"send sufficiency"; "living gives / An atavistic echo"—are juxtaposed with images of barrenness—"Zero has gathered into a hole"; "I am without / Retinue." The poem then correlates emptiness, rather than provision, to the bank, thus rejecting capitalism by invoking its prime institution. With "the bank's a thief," Howe thus subverts the bank's conventional social function by insisting that it is not the one who is robbed but the one who robs. The bank stands in as a metonymic signifier of the bourgeois-capitalist order, and its thievery contributes to the drain on the speaker's material and spiritual resources.

The section concludes with the description of "The feel of accidie / Is a collar, metal and economic, / When the world takes up no space but I," a condemnation of the ego-centrism of the world dominated by the "I" and a lament over the "accidie" that results (124). "Accidie" is a theological term that was common in medieval Europe but whose usage has declined in contemporary culture; it refers to "a state of restlessness and an inability either to work or to pray" (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 10). Accidie is a profound state of alienation, similar to the psychological condition of depression, but it is more accurately considered a spiritual despair.⁸⁸ Furthermore, accidie "is generally regarded as affecting particularly monks and hermits, who are more liable to it than other persons owing to the outward monotony of their

⁸⁸ Howe's use of the term "accidie" in accordance with her comments on her use of theological vocabulary: "I chose to break away from a Freudian and psychoanalytic vocabulary to one which seemed to me (and still does [*sic*] more liberating. This was the vocabulary of theology" (Brito 102). She remarks on this shift of vocabulary in *The Wedding Dress* in the section "Catholic" when she asks, why not say "despairing" rather than "depressed"?

life” (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* 10). Interestingly, Howe asserts that accidie, an alienation associated with asceticism, can be related to the materialism and individualism of capitalist modernity for it, like a “metal and economic” collar, encircles and constrains those in its grasp. If materialistic, bourgeois individualism engenders accidie, and accidie leads to the self’s isolation and withdrawal, then a solution lies in a focus on *both* social conditions and reenergized spiritual life. As with liberation theology, Howe does not oppose the spiritual to the social, but links them. Communion with the divine does not perpetuate the subject’s isolation and consequent self-centered inwardness; a lack of spiritual sustenance does. Howe asserts not only that the material conditions of poverty and injustice can enervate one’s spiritual condition but also that one’s spirituality must be nourished to avoid accidie’s temptation to retreat inward. Thus the interior and exterior registers of the self are interwoven: the self is not an isolate opposed to social or material conditions. The social and spiritual elements of the self, taken together, are able to resist the bourgeois individualism that produces atomized individuals in the first place. “In the Spirit There are No Accidents,” Howe’s connection between materialism and acedia offers a way of thinking of a poetry of transcendence and prayerful contemplation not as an escape from social conditions but as means to combat social withdrawal. It enacts poetry of transcendence as a *poethical* activity, both recognizing social ills and providing a model of spiritually sustained, other-oriented subjectivity.

Bewilderment, Wandering, and Howe’s Poethics

So far in this chapter, I have investigated Howe’s poethics by considering her poetry in relation to her poetic predecessor Oppen, particularly with her use of the serial/spiral lyric form, and within a framework of Levinasian ethics in conjunction with liberation theology. It is important to emphasize that while a faith-based orientation towards writing may seem to indicate

a preconceived and predetermined course along lines of religious conviction, to Howe, the emphasis on spiraling movement within her poetic texts draws on models of mysticism that pointedly do *not* drive the lyric subject towards a fixed *telos*. Instead, the self is continually emptying out and transforming through its experiences. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Howe links the poetics and politics of bewilderment to what she sees as the high value of wandering in life, in thought, and in language. To Howe, the value of wandering productively contrasts with normative social values of coherence and fixity, as she argues that the spiral is a place “to learn about perplexity and loss of bearing. And even if it is associated with childhood, madness, stupidity, and failure, even if it shows not only how to get lost but also how it feels not to return, bewilderment has a high status in several mystical traditions” (15). Howe connects mystical experiences, such as the disorientation of bewilderment, with ethical practice, and advances bewilderment as an ethics as well as a poetics and politics (*The Wedding Dress* 5, 12). Howe insists that a subject’s perception of experience needs to be continually re-adjusted in a way that allows for openness to encounter alterity of the suffering Other. Moreover, she offers another way to explain her exploration of perception and encounter. Howe’s conceptualization of dualistic life-views draws on both liberationist and phenomenological influences in order to illuminate her poethics. As Howe explains in an essay in *The Wedding Dress*, “two fundamental and oppositional life-views . . . coexist in many of us”: an “invisible-faithful view” and a “materialist-skeptical view” promulgated by the entrenched power dynamics of the status quo (WD 12).⁸⁹ This “materialist-skeptical view,” Howe argues, is the one that many of us live, and it

⁸⁹ Although Howe here sets forth a binary opposition between faith and “skepticism” or reason that is on some level simplistic and didactic, it is important to note that she qualifies her critique of rationalism when she states “Reason without the other values becomes evil” (WD “Catholic” 121). Moreover, her advocacy for a life in faith is neither prescriptive nor dogmatic. While avowing a Catholic faith, her writings both affirm what she sees as the valuable commonalities among faith traditions, and she gestures towards thinking and sacred objects from multiple faith traditions, including Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist (Brito 100; WD 6, 13, 22; *Come and See* 87-88).

promotes an egoistic and ultimately enervating value system based on political and economic systems that benefit a privileged few while impoverishing many global inhabitants (*WD* 12). Resisting complete submission to such materialistic perspectives and making room for the “invisible-faithful” view takes a continual recalibration of perception, a *re-seeing* of the world that is other-oriented and, therefore, inherently ethical.⁹⁰

In order to convey the ethical potential of wandering, many of Howe’s writings, like *Forged*, hinge on serial/spiral movement through the use of the trope of journey. In the serial/spiral prose poem “Catholic” in *The Wedding Dress*, Howe draws on the medieval theologian and Dominican priest, Thomas Aquinas, as a model of peripatetic thinker from an earlier era. At the same time, Howe also frames itinerancy within twenty-first century social conditions: “it is imperative to find a virtue in itinerancy because this is the world now. People are either fugitives who want to go home, or seekers who don’t want to go home” (119). Howe thus positions the activity of wandering as both participating in an inquiry-based strain of the Catholic tradition and as an approach to contemporary life and writing that is socially and ethically engaged. By resisting stasis, possessions, and security, the act of wandering enables one to identify with the materially and/or spiritually homeless, and is thus in line with bewilderment as a politics and an ethics. As such, in this emphasis on wandering, the processes of perception and subjectivity in Howe’s texts are neither static nor circumscribed, but are, instead, open-ended and dynamic.

⁹⁰ Howe’s emphasis on the movement of perceptions demonstrates the resonance of Projectivist poetics in her texts as well, for, as Olson writes of poetic composition in his foundational essay, “Projectivist Verse,” “always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER,” formulating, Tim Woods argues, a “new ethic of perception,” that allows for Olson’s “ALTERNATIVE TO THE EGO-POSITION” since language in perpetual movement, cannot be rigidly programmed, which “diminishes the importance of the dominant, co-ordinating subject” (Woods 459). Woods places Projectivist verse as the direct inheritor of the Objectivist poetics, so it makes sense that Howe shares parallels with both poetic movements.

“Catholic” features an itinerant speaking subject who drives around Southern California freeways with no stated destination; indeed, the poem concludes with the affirmation “I keep moving” (122). Section 27 describes an area around the American-Mexican border:

The second border on the other side of the freeway crossing north at the Marine training base. Ugly nuclear power plants, the humping hills. Women running alone at dawn, aliens sending money home, in their wallets pictures of family and friends, love letters, addresses, I don’t want to be here. The canyons are groomed and pocked with bourgeois housing developments that are built for eclipse. (117)

This passage surveys a familiar landscape, in which the physical presence of commonplace sites of the twenty-first century American military-industrial complex—the border, the freeway, a Marine base, nuclear power plants, residences of the wealthy—are juxtaposed against the presence of the marginalized population of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. This passage provides a corrective to commonplace perceptions of class, race and legal status. In contrast to the dehumanizing nomenclature that is typical in contemporary political rhetoric, these “aliens” are humanized by the text’s description of their possessions, such as photos of loved ones, “love letters,” and addresses. The contrast between the haves and have-nots in this passage is demonstrated by the difference in their possessions and their approach to capital. Whereas the “aliens” are characterized as wearing their meager possessions on their bodies, their wallets emptied in the action of “sending money” to their families, the wealthy hoard capital in the large residences of their “bourgeois housing developments.” The text emphasizes the opportunistic and exploitative relationship between the materialist “bourgeois” residents and nature, for the canyons have been “groomed” for the aesthetic and domestic pleasure of the inhabitants, while the phrase “built for eclipse” hints at the housing developments’—and their owners—welcome

of the canyon walls' shade and obscurity; they hide away in comfort, avoiding the light. Moreover, the text demonstrates Howe's itinerant values, for it weaves a contrast between movement and immobility; the running women, "humping hills," and immigrants sending money are dynamic, in contrast to the solid constructions that house the power structures that are lodged or "pocked" within the text. The is contrast correlates to Howe's ethical deployment of subjectivity, for it values movement, openness and disorientation rather than possessiveness, hoarding, and stasis.

Furthermore, this passage is phenomenological in that it provides an example of the kind of re-calibration of the perception of experience that Howe's texts advance in resistance to the "materialist-skeptical view" that marginalizes immigrants as criminals and privileges the wealth and luxury of the "bourgeois" residents. Illustrating Howe's liberationist influence, this passage presents an alternative account that encompasses the point of view of the impoverished "aliens," and humanizes them as economic refugees, in resistance to the "normal" account in accord with the "materialist-skeptical view." Thus, the poethics of "Catholic" rests upon the defamiliarization of a commonplace, contemporary landscape in order to acknowledge the alterity of marginalized "aliens." The text illustrates the poetics and ethics of bewilderment: the wandering perspective of the lyric "I" enacts a model of disorientation, recalibration of perception, and movement away from normative value categories in order to advance an other-oriented subjectivity.

"9/11": Ethics and Textual Encounter

While "Catholic" wanders across one particular American twenty-first century landscape of southern California, two poems from Howe's 2004 collection, *On the Ground*, survey multiple settings to addresses the problems of the post-9/11 geopolitical climate and the fraught role of poetry within this context. I argue that, in *On the Ground*, Howe deploys an ethical vocabulary

while exploring the inherent limitations of poetry's power while exploring both postlanguage lyric poetry's responsibility and ethical solutions. In the short lyric poem "9/11," Howe again takes up themes of perception and misperception; she critiques the type of "skeptical-materialistic" vision perpetuated by America's military-industrial complex—a view from above—which erases difference, fails to recognize otherness, and perpetuates violent actions:

The first person is an existentialist

like trash in the groin of the sand dunes

like a brown cardboard home beside a dam

like seeing like things the same

between Death Valley and the desert of Paran (23)

In "9/11," Howe uses the strategy of litany, employing the deliberate overuse of synonyms and the repetition of the word "like," to demonstrate the ethical problem of "like seeing like things the same"—that is, the problem of a vision so distant that erases its difference. The kind of vision Howe identifies is shaped by an American worldview bent on geopolitical dominance in the turn of the twenty-first century. The poem deploys a liberationist approach insofar as it is rooted in the experience of poverty, for it surveys a landscape that, if viewed closely, is revealed as squalid—litter dots the landscape, and a cardboard box provides the fragile, indeed, doomed shelter for the impoverished.

Most of the poem, however, underscores that these sobering realities are typically not surveyed closely:

like looking down on Utah as if

it was Saudi Arabia or Pakistan

like war-planes out of Miramar

like a split cult a jolt of coke New York

like Mexico in its deep beige couplets (23)

The domineering American psyche tends to take a view from above, as in the reference to “war-planes out of Miramar.” “Miramar” literally means “sea view,” and this phrase refers to two kinds of distant vision: the expansive horizon implied in the name “sea view,” and the aerial view from the military planes. “Miramar” literally alludes to the annual Miramar air show in San Diego, a huge military air show that is a site where America’s military and technological strength is staged for audiences of over 300,000 attendees (“Sponsorship”).⁹¹ It is from just such “war-planes” as the ones “out of Miramar” that provide an aerial view that, as in Levinas’s ethical critique of vision, erases the singularity of alterity: from such great heights, sites in Pakistan or the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia and the biblical desert of Paran, appear to be the same as places in the American desert, such as Death Valley and Utah. Howe’s reference to “war-planes” recalls the 9/11 attackers and their use of airplanes as weapons. While not excusing the 9/11 terrorists, Howe’s emphasis on U.S. air power suggests that America’s militaristic ideology and capitalist economy have their own culpability.

Howe indicates another problematic dimension to American’s distancing vision. The allusion to the desert of Paran indicates a Biblical site of itinerancy: it includes the wilderness where Abraham travelled and the desert where Israelites spent part of forty years wandering after the Exodus in the Sinai Peninsula. However, the Islamic tradition identifies the desert of Paran,

⁹¹ For more on the Miramar Air Show, see <http://www.miramarairshow.com>.

or *Faran*, as part of the region of Hejaz, around Mecca, the land where Abraham's son Ishmael and his mother Hagar settled (Firestone 65, 205n18).⁹² Thus, in the Islamic tradition, Paran/Faran is a region identified with pilgrimage. In a poem dedicated to "9/11," the geopolitical clash between the Islamic and Western worlds, the desert of Paran alludes to a site in the holy lands that is perceived differently by the two different traditions. The reference alludes to both the different perceptions, which carries the potential for conflict, but also emphasizes the common geographical roots of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. Moreover, both the biblical and Islamic traditions assign the desert a spiritual meaning borne out of journey—whether wandering or pilgrimage—and both meanings are erased by the leveling vision of America's militaristic endeavors for world domination. This focus on the flattening level of vision has implications for the ethics of poetry writing as well, for it demonstrates its Objectivist poetic lineage in its observation of the ethical problems in symbolism and simile. "[L]ike seeing like things the same," is an ethically problematic activity, both within the political world and within the world of the poem, and, as Oppen argued, poetic similes and metaphors should be held to high standards of accountability. Thus "9/11" highlights the ethical dimensions of the tendency towards a dangerous, leveling vision that delivers only sameness.

In addition to identifying the problematic ethics of leveling vision and reductive poetic metaphor, Howe brings in the question of ethics by framing the poem with comments on the use of the first, second and third person in language. Indeed, the opening line, "[t]he first person is an existentialist," foregrounds Howe's embrace of existentialist thought.⁹³ While "existentialist" is a

⁹² For the biblical references to the desert of wilderness of Paran, see *Revised Standard Version*, Genesis 21:17-21, Numbers 10:11-12, 33; 12:16; 13:3, and 1 Samuel 25:1-4.

⁹³ In *The Wedding Dress*, Howe explicitly embraces existentialist thought and challenges postmodernism's rejection of existentialism: "I am at the end of a generation that began with existentialism. . . . We are not by any means done with the existentialism of Camus and Sartre, and we don't see the history of culture in blocks—as modernist one minute and postmodern the next—but as a long struggle without interruption" (88).

broad term, I read Howe's reference as indicating a subject that both searches for meaning in a world devoid of certainty and assumes responsibility for acts of free will. Almost buried in the middle of "9/11" is the line "the second person is the beloved," which suggests that a Levinasian, direct address to the "second person" indicates the embrace of the Other as beloved. Concluding the poem is are the lines "like this, like that . . . like Call us all It / Thou It. 'Sky to Spirit! Call us all It!' / The third person is a materialist" (23). "The third person is a materialist," I understand as a reference to the philosophical sense of materialism, which is the view that all facts depend upon or are reducible to physical processes. The third person as "materialist" indicates the circumstance where the other is regarded as a dehumanized object, an "It." The poem's concluding line, then, situates and re-names the ethical consequences of the leveling vision I have identified: the action of "like seeing like things the same" enables the subject to reduce others to material categories. Thus, "9/11" comments on pronoun usage to draw a contrast between the Levinasian recognition of the person in his or her alterity and singularity through second-person address and the dehumanization of the Other as object through reduction to a third-person category.

Howe also gestures to dehumanizing relations as rooted in the materialistic-skeptical worldview that the text implies inheres in both the 9/11 terrorists' *and* Americans' militaristic ideologies. The text offers an example of dehumanizing violence with the reference to "[a]n earthquake a turret with arms and legs." The collapse of the Twin Towers is likened to the disruption of an earthquake, while the poem's structure of overused synonyms simultaneously belies this metaphor: 9/11 had the cataclysmic scale of an earthquake but was pointedly *not* a natural disaster. The violent act of the terrorist attack flattens the distinction between two types of events, rendering different things similar. Furthermore, the image "a turret with arms and

legs” invokes the scene of 9/11 with economy. This is 9/11, prior to the collapse of the second tower, as represented in media accounts: the viewer sees the tower under attack and the flailing limbs on the bodies of its doomed occupants. Moreover, the word “turret” is a military term that refers to the defensive position on a tower. The violence of the 9/11 attacks transformed the second tower into a turret and melded the tower and the victims’ bodies into one object. Thus, the terrorists’ violence renders victims’ bodies to mere material by denying their humanity and treating them as mere objects to destroy. Furthermore, the words aurally enact violence: in the lines “An earthquake a turret,” “like winners taking the hit,” “like a split cult a jolt of coke New York,” and “Call us all It / Thou It,” the repeated voiceless stops in “t” and “k” consonants and the compilation of monosyllabic words with short vowel sounds produces a staccato harshness that underscores the violence and rupture both described in the content and constructed through the text’s parataxis.

The climax of the poem, “like Call us all It / Thou It. ‘Sky to Spirit! Call us all It!’” is a lament in the wake of 9/11. Its invocation of “us all” indicates a collective failure to engage ethically; both the 9/11 terrorists and Americans in their bid for global domination invite the reduction of human relations. The solution, “the second person is beloved,” as realized through the direct address of the other and, therefore, the recognition of the other’s humanity, resides within the poem, but its presence is obscured within the overpowering litany of equivocating simile. While “9/11” allows for the possibility of ethical encounter with the shift from third person objectification to second person address, the formal structure of the poem underscores the difficulty inherent in collective action.

“9/11” also comments on the ethics of poetic writing in its commentary on the usage of the first person both within the poetic text and beyond. The opening line, “The first person is an

existentialist,” asserts that the first person can be ethically deployed insofar as the poem recognizes its relation to the other. A poem in an “I-It” relation with the other—that is, a domineering lyric “I” that relegates either readers or others within the poem to instruments—would be ethically problematic. Instead, I suggest that the presence of both “I” and “Thou,” indicates that an ethical, “I-Thou” relation is possible within a poetic text. The “second person” as “the beloved,” structurally buried in the middle of the text, is nevertheless an important commentary on Howe’s poethics as they gesture to the relation between reader and writer. While the text does not use the second person directly, it theorizes the vocative, therefore gesturing towards the address of the reader. Thus, despite its lack of direct address, I read “9/11” as invested in the subject of lyric address to a readership for, as Waters argues, “the second person and the vocative do not exhaust the ways in which poems can signal their addressees” (6). Of course, it is true that, within the structure of “9/11,” the possibility for the invocation of “the second person” as “the beloved,” is almost drowned out by the louder and more insistent cry of the larger, materialistic world: “Call us all It!” Thus, Howe recognizes the limitations of poetry’s power within a cynical world that is bent on its own destruction while gesturing to the capacity of poetry to survive as an ethical force within that world.

This conceptualization of the lyric as capable of an ethical relation between writer and reader is present in Howe’s writing on poetics. In line with Brewster’s argument that lyric is fundamentally concerned with the nature of address and Waters’ interpretation of lyric’s tendency to reach out to unknown readers, Howe contends that, within the lyric, “A call and response to and from a stranger is implied” (*The Wedding Dress* 19). Furthermore, in the 2011 collection of poetry and essays, *Come and See*, Howe, like Rankine in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, draws on Paul Celan’s metaphor of poetry as a message in a bottle to characterize the wonder of

finding an unexpected text that in turn has a profound influence on her thinking (83).⁹⁴ Howe also cites Celan's poetry to indicate an encounter with the unexpected presence of the other: "A miracle can be the appearance of another person rising out of an emptiness that we are beginning to accept as permanent. As Paul Celan wrote, it is 'A rumbling: / Truth itself / walked among / men, / amidst the / metaphor squall'" (91). In this passage, Howe gestures to the possibility of encounter with the other as a contrast with the nihilism of seemingly permanent emptiness. The invocation of Celan's "metaphor squall" indicates the belief in the presence of the human within the confusing tempests of figurative language. Thus, Howe draws on Celanian poetics to characterize poetry, which addresses and engages with a reader who is at once "a stranger" and "beloved," as attempting to fulfill an ethical imperative of turning towards the other in a world of human suffering.

Modern Poetry: Limitations and Ethical Possibilities

In another post 9/11 serial/spiral poem of journey from *On the Ground*, "Kneeling Bus," Howe takes up the tension between modern poetry's political endeavors and its limitations while gesturing to the primacy of the individual subject's ethical responsibility. "Kneeling Bus" begins with an experience of the lyric subject on a bus in a specific, post 9/11 time and place: "the back of the M11 / February 2003." Interspersed with fragmented descriptions of New York City life, are scenes both utopian—a vision of individual and universal kindness—and horrific—including a section where a "frightened terrorist" kills a girl. At one point, Howe references the political intentions of her poetry: "I'll never write a villanelle / but a chorus of spirals / to muck up your wars" (49). Here, Howe aligns herself with postmodern rejection of fixed form—in this example, the classical form of the villanelle—and, like the Objectivist, Black Mountain, and Language poets, correlates open form with subversion, that is, the attempt to "muck up" the dominant

⁹⁴ Howe refers to finding a letter written by novelist Ilona Karmel as a Celanian message in a bottle.

political order. The implicit you of “your wars” in this passage is the Bush administration, who, in February 2003 had engaged the U.S. in the war in Afghanistan and was poised to invade Iraq.

While Howe’s anti-war political stance is clear, later in the poem, Howe acknowledges her own and fellow poets’ efforts to effect change in the world as well as their limitations:

The poets of my generation

And younger peck at the egg of the sky.

Blue shell, blue shell let all be well outside!

Tip-tip, won’t crack . . . chip-chip, try try! (60)

In a metaphor that includes a reference to her own poetic vocation, Howe likens poets of her generation and the younger to baby birds who try to chip away at the egg shell of the “sky,” or social and historical conditions that surround them. She alludes to her own and other twentieth-century poets’ will and good intentions, but the image of the poet as a baby bird trapped within an eggshell bespeaks both determination and relative impotence, vitality and fragility. Like Rankine’s acknowledgement of the poet’s feelings of despair in *DLMBL*, Howe’s image of a poet is a far cry from, say, an empowered activist-poet raising a rallying cry or a vociferous poet-prophet who plans to shape a culture according to his or her vision.

This passage also comments on developments in modern poetry directly:

A hundred years of turnover

and four generations later

we know everything about evil

in the public sphere

With the phrase “A hundred years of turnover,” Howe extends backwards as well as forwards, thus placing poetic efforts in twentieth and early twenty-first century verse, which encompasses modernist and postmodernist efforts, into a collective “we.” Thus, Howe makes no distinctions here among poetic schools, camps or lineages, instead recognizing that, taken together, the “four generations” of poets in the twentieth century and early twenty-first century have gained knowledge of “evil / in the public sphere.” But this knowledge continually runs up against limits in its application in individuals’ lives, as Howe turns to the question, to both herself and the reader, of how to “disassemble / the hypocritical / crippling factor in every body?” The term “every body” uses the sonic form of the familiar term “everybody” but separates it into two words, thereby emphasizing the individual subject in his or her own body and therefore within vulnerability, weakness, and susceptibility to being crippled by moral failings. At the same time, “every body” also points to persons in both collective and individual dimensions, demonstrating what Woods terms the “ethical turn” of late twentieth century poetry in its emphasis on the subject’s responsibility. Poets may know “everything about evil / in the public sphere,” but for change to happen “every body” must disassemble their “crippling” hypocrisy. Politics, in the form of political analysis, or, in Jenkins’ terms, an archaeology of the workings of power, has been a significant achievement within poetry, but it is not enough. Howe’s questions insist upon ethical inquiry and ethical correction at both the individual and collective levels.

As with “9/11,” “Kneeling Bus” is not without hope, and it likewise offers both an ethical imperative for the subject to recognize and responsibility for the Other as well as the recognition of the difficulty inherent in such a task. In the middle of “Kneeling Bus,” Howe offers what

Woods calls the Objectivist project's powerful "utopian and ethical vision . . . of openness to unimagined possibilities" that "call for a radical transformation of the present" (*Poetics* 2, 10):

This has to happen at the exact same minute:

.

The people are good

The people are tender

The people are just

and merciful to each other

All this has to happen to everyone without exception. (47)

This vision is ethical in that emphasizes both the responsibility of the individual subject to be "good," "just / and merciful to each other." This vision is also utopian in that it applies such ethical action to all of humanity. Indeed, this vision—as in other moments of vision in Howe's lyrical poetry—demonstrates a strain that is also romantic in its imaginative thrust and visionary intensity. But the text does not resolve in the tidy closure and false comfort of this vision, for it moves onto questions that highlight the gap between the utopian vision and the suffering and injustice in the world: "Why is the messiah dumped in a pit? / Why is the messiah scorned and laughed at? / . . . / No answer. That's why" (47). These questions, which convey Howe's liberationist conviction that Christ is present within humanity, and especially within the marginalized and oppressed, show the textual movement between the confrontation of the reality of suffering and an ethical and utopian vision for change in the present, with an emphasis on the subject's responsibility for the other. Furthermore, like the presence of the "beloved" in "9/11," Howe structurally places this hopeful passage in the middle of the lyric sequence of "Kneeling Bus," and thus does not develop a climax that closes with a utopian vision. "Kneeling Bus"

therefore eschews both narrative linearity and conventional expectations of postromantic lyric movement towards closure. Rather, the utopian vision is gestured to and folded within the serial/spiral movement as an imaginative possibility within material realities.

How does “Kneeling Bus” conclude? As the serial/spiral sequence carries on in “Kneeling Bus,” the liberationist swing from humanity to God and return to humanity continues, ultimately concluding with the lyric “I” back on the M11:

My church is this machine rolling
the people along ...

Sometimes I whisper *help*
to interrupt my wheeling brain. (64)

In a departure from conventional, Romantic lyric conventions, the conclusion of “Kneeling Bus” does not build to a simplified utopian vision that transcends material conditions. Rather, the vision of individual and collective responsibility informs the lyric subject’s perception of the immanent conditions of her surroundings. This section demonstrates many features of Howe’s poetry that I have identified in this chapter: the trope of the bus journey conveys the itinerant lyric subject in continual, bewildering movement, and the text registers both ongoing perceptions of the subject’s exteriority and dimensions of interiority, including feelings of despair and desperation. Tellingly, the simple word of prayer, “*help*,” indicates the openness of the lyric “I” to the divine, or infinitely exterior, to “interrupt my wheeling brain,” or, in Levinasian terms, to disrupt the subject’s egocentrism. This openness is underscored formally, through the incorporation of considerable white space and minimal closure through punctuation.

This passage reveals Howe's liberationist influence as it chronicles the presence of the impoverished, for "sometimes / my church is a public latrine," and "Sometimes my church is a Franciscan chapel / near Penn Station. Beads rattle. / People sleep, mutter and curse" (64). The "Franciscan chapel / near Penn Station" refers to Church and Friary of Saint Francis of Assisi, which is run by Franciscan friars, a religious order devoted to service of the indigent ("Mission Statement"). Impoverished persons also appear in the poem as they "sleep, mutter, and curse" in the Franciscan chapel. It is in the quotidian and humble sites—the city bus, the "public latrine"—where the lyric "I" makes her "church," thus conveying the subject's ongoing and everyday connection between immanent and transcendent experiences. Finally, an ethical imperative both broadly overarching and humbly quotidian is revealed in the conclusion, as Howe moves between the reality of humanity's suffering, to a reflection on the divine, and back to humanity. The closing gesture of the poem, "When I leave this bus / a *thanks* to the driver is to cross and live" concludes *Kneeling Bus* with the lyric subject's brief encounter with an Other that takes the form of gratitude. This statement of thankfulness allows the lyric subject "to cross"—that is, to reach over the boundary between self and Other, as well as to make a blessing through the sign of the cross—"and live." The recognition of the existence of the divine in an encounter with the Other is a life-enhancing action.

Although Howe does not offer a facile optimism or easy solutions, she emphasizes the urgent need for the unexpected messages of hope in the twenty-first century. To Howe, writing can be an ethical force in the today's world. Howe explains as much in *Come and See*, in an argument that is similar to Retallack's articulation of the "butterfly effect," but through the use of theological vocabulary of the epiphanic and the miraculous:

A leap out of one's seemingly determined fate (an act of charity) can come from any number of experiences ... and this message is offered to the twenty-first century as something to be treasured. More than ever, now: to believe there is something that is not simply a norm. In a sense, when this epiphany takes place, it is a miracle. A miracle is an event that changes the meaning of things. It is like a thought that floats free of the surrounding systems and conventions, and enters, uninvited, a sentence, a stanza, a conversation, a lab result, and sends it on another path. (91)

Like Retallack's "swerves," Howe's idea of the miraculous epiphany describes any event that sets thought, language, and inquiry outside of norms and allows the subject to move outside of a predetermined course; and like Retallack, Howe emphasizes these deviations from the norm as particularly urgent in the twenty-first century. While any number of experiences can facilitate a miraculous maneuver outside such norms, poetic language has a particular tenacity and flexibility. Ultimately, Howe sees poetry as a possible counter to nihilism: "poetry itself is a part of the mind reserved for resistance to force. Poetry doesn't just help someone survive, it is a survivor itself: fluid, protean, as it passes through walls" (*Come and See* 89-90). Poetry both enables survival and itself endures entrenched power dynamics by transgressing the "walls" of the rigid structures of thought and language within the status quo. Like Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Howe's later poetry offers a postlanguage lyric that advances a means to survival in the complexity of twenty-first century American culture. In its insistence on the contact of the divine and infinite in the everyday, Howe provides an example of a postlanguage lyric poetry of transcendence, rooted in both the Romantic/lyric and Objectivist traditions, that is ethical in its deployment of lyric subjectivity, its exploration of perception and encounter with marginalized

Others, and its resistance to the dehumanizing power structures within contemporary American culture.

CHAPTER FOUR

DOUBLES, GHOSTS, AND TEXTUAL ENCOUNTERS: ETHICS AND ELIZABETH ROBINSON'S POSTLANGUAGE LYRIC POETRY

In this dissertation, my investigation of each postlanguage lyric poet's poethics has been essentially twofold: an exploration of each poet's articulation of an ethical lyric "I," and a discussion of each poet's conceptualization of ethical encounter between poet and reader, involving each poet's implied or direct invocation of a lyric "you." I now turn to another postlanguage lyric poet, Elizabeth Robinson, whose writings also theorize and enact an other-oriented lyric subjectivity and extend the possibility of lyric as ethical encounter between poet and reader. In my exploration of Robinson's work, however, I shift to apply the theoretical lens of Derridean deconstruction and ethics, including the concepts of the doubleness of language, *hauntology*, radical hospitality, and the gift. While Derrida's ethics build directly on those of Levinas, as Derrida follows Levinas's centrality of the subject's responsibility to the Other, there are key departures from Levinas in Derrida's ethical thought. Notably, Derrida critiques what he sees as Levinas's idealized vision of experience with the Other by insisting that the subject always situates the Other in relation to the self. To Derrida, ethics depends upon this relation of sameness-in-difference, and his position consequently emphasizes the continued appearance of difference, conflict, and potential for violence in encounter.

Robinson's Poetic Classification

Elizabeth Robinson is a prolific writer of contemporary American poetry and criticism. She has written fourteen full-length collections of poetry, or multi-genre collections that blend prose and poetry, between 1990 and 2013. She has also published a number of academic articles on pedagogy and literary criticism of post-war American poetry; these address topics that are

reflected in her poetry as well, including Christian theology, mystic spirituality, poststructuralist theory, and literary explorations of the supernatural. Like her poetic predecessor, Fanny Howe, Elizabeth Robinson has been identified by Paul Hoover in the second edition of the *Norton Anthology of Postmodern American Poetry* as a “postlanguage” lyric poet, in that her poetry embraces lyricism and allows a space for lyric subjectivity (xlvii). I also suggest that Robinson, like Rankine and Howe, advances a postlanguage lyric poetry insofar as it hinges upon her retention and revision of an ethical lyric subjectivity.

Furthermore, Robinson’s poetry shares several other parallels with both Howe and Rankine. In an interview with Sarah Rosenthal, Robinson cites Howe as a major influence, and while both poets avow their Christian beliefs and explore spirituality in their lyric poetry, their faith traditions and expressions of faith differ (250-51). In contrast to Howe’s Catholic spirituality, which is heavily influenced by the faith tradition of liberation theology and its predominant concerns for social justice, Robinson is a Protestant, and her expression of faith—and much of her poetry overall—does not directly broadcast a political stance. Furthermore, while spirituality and mysticism surface in Robinson’s poetry, their presence is often muted or indirect when compared to Howe’s. Moreover, Robinson differs from Howe in her direct engagement with poststructuralism, but this difference in turn highlights a strong parallel between the work of Robinson and Rankine. Indeed, Robinson, born in 1961, is of the same generation as Rankine, and they are both poets who started publishing in the 1990s. Moreover, both Robinson and Rankine’s engagement with poststructuralism in their writings—including self-conscious commentary on their deployment of the lyric “I”—testify to their historical context, for they both began working in an era that developed after the Language school had established a strong influence on experimental American poetry writing.

As with both Rankine and Howe, my application of the classification of postlanguage lyric poetry indicates that Robinson cannot be neatly categorized as a member of a particular late twentieth/early twenty-first century experimental poetic “school,” but engages with the work of a number of poets across lineages and writing communities. Indeed, Robinson herself resists easy classification; while discussing her admiration for earlier poets Barbara Guest and Robin Blaser, whom, Robinson notes, do not “fit neatly into the proclivity of their peers’ writings,” she poses the apt rhetorical question that can be extended to characterize contemporary postlanguage lyric poets: “Is it possible that a U.S. poetics, then, is characterized both by belonging to a community and being liminal to it?” (Poetry Society of America, n.p.). While resistance to easy classification can be an admirable quality for an artist, perhaps Robinson’s own liminal status has hindered extensive critical attention to her work thus far. Despite her impressively prolific output, her poetry has only been analyzed in one critical article, by Rusty Morrison, who examines poems from Robinson’s 2003 collection, *Apprehend*, alongside the work of Fanny Howe and Barbara Guest, through the lens of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology.⁹⁵

Overview of the Chapter

In this chapter, I aim to initiate further critical consideration of Robinson’s work with a particular focus on her poethics, that is, her poetry’s exploration of lyric subjectivity and the ethics of reading and writing lyric poetry. First, I will provide an overview of Robinson’s poetic form and style and their relation to politics and ethics by drawing on two selected poems from *Counterpart* (2012) and *Apprehend* (2003), respectively.⁹⁶ I then begin to consider how Robinson theorizes and articulates postlanguage lyric subjectivity by turning to an extended

⁹⁵ Morrison uses Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology to examine Robinson’s poetic explorations of perceptions of objects.

⁹⁶ I cite only one poem from *Apprehend* because the particular poem, “Chicken Little,” a treatment of 9/11, provides a useful example to explicate Robinson’s political stance and, given its subject matter, can be contrasted with the relatively more descriptive and politically charged 9/11 writings by Rankine and Howe.

consideration her 2012 collection *Counterpart*. Specifically, I analyze how the trope of the double explores lyric self-encounter through an application of Derrida's poststructuralist theory of language, particularly as related to the doubleness of language. I argue that Robinson draws on the figure of the double order to complicate the construction and reception of the "I" in lyric poetry. Rather than simplistic self-reflection and self-replication, the lyric "I" can be figured as a site of doubleness, difference, openness to alterity, and therefore ethical engagement between the subject and her surroundings. Furthermore, an essential element in *Counterpart*—indeed, in all three collections of Robinson's that I have selected—is intertextuality. As emerges in my discussion of *Counterpart* and, to some degree, of each collection I will consider, Robinson's extensive intertextuality can be read as part of her poethics, for it conveys poetry composition as a communal activity that necessarily involves reading and responding to other writers.

I then turn to Robinson's 2013 collection *On Ghosts*, which, like *Counterpart*, also draws extensively on supernatural tropes—in this collection, ghosts and haunting—in order to theorize how subjectivity inherently incorporates alterity. The text of *On Ghosts* explores the interaction between the self and (often ghostly) Other through accounts of personal experiences and through descriptions of writers' and readers' engagements with texts and textuality, including the process of reading, composition, and translation. In my reading of *On Ghosts*, I draw on Derrida's ethics of radical hospitality. I also reference Derridean *hauntology*, which replaces the study of being/presence expressed in the near-homonym "ontology," with the deconstructive figure of the destabilizing ghost who is neither fully absent nor present, neither alive nor dead. Moreover, the ghost is an intrusion that delivers ethical injunctions, and is therefore akin to the Levinasian Other. Accordingly, Derrida's description of haunted subjectivity illuminates Robinson's concept of an other-oriented subjectivity that emerges, textually, through the interplay of absence

and presence, interiority *and* exteriority. In addition to the exploration of the self as haunted subjectivity in *On Ghosts*, I also consider Robinson's nuanced conceptualization of lyric voice by providing an overview of recent discourse on voice and by applying contemporary poet and critic Susan Stewart's theory of lyric voice to Robinson's poetics. This investigation of lyric voice provides further insight into the way that Robinson's postlanguage poetics involve the subject's interplay between interiority and exteriority.

The final part of this chapter shifts towards a consideration of Robinson's conceptualization and direct or implied invocation of the second person, or lyric "you." Accordingly, I turn to an earlier collection of lyric poems, the 2006 collection, *Apostrophe*, for, as the title implies, a central theme of this collection is the poet's address to the reader through the direct or implied invocation of the second person. My readings of selections from *Apostrophe* explore textual encounter between poet and reader as theorized by deconstructionist critic Jonathan Culler's influential interpretation of lyric apostrophe. In my readings of selected poems, I also extend my application of Derridean ethics and his concept of the "gift" and return to Robinson's exploration of lyric voice. I argue that, in *Apostrophe*, Robinson draws on the trope of text as gift and foregrounds a discussion of lyric voice to both enable the possibility of ethical encounter between the writer and reader through lyric address and highlight the complexities and limitations of textual encounter. Furthermore, I argue that Robinson's exploration of lyric address can be elucidated by Derridean ethics that temper some of the more utopian elements of the Levinasian-Celanian model of reading as encounter.

As with the earlier chapters in this project, my poethical exploration of Robinson's writings are guided by questions that focus on lyric subjectivity and the ethics of writing and reading lyric poetry. In particular, in this chapter, I ask the following questions: how does

Robinson theorize and illustrate lyric subjectivity and related concepts, including self-exploration, interiority, presence, and lyric voice? What are the ethical implications of her approach to lyric subjectivity? How does the ethics Robinson advances for postlanguage lyric poetry manifest in terms of the poetry's use of language? How does Robinson characterize the practices of reading and writing lyric poetry as an engagement with ethical encounter between poet and reader?

Description of Robinson's Poetry: Form, Style, Politics, and Ethics

To begin my exploration of Robinson's poethics, I will first consider the form of her poetic texts. Formally, much of Robinson's work appears like "conventional" contemporary lyric poetry in that her free-verse lines of poetry often align along the left-hand margin and employ relatively straightforward syntax, although at times she plays with both margin placement and syntax, as some examples in this chapter will demonstrate. Robinson's poetry is often spare, and even stark, with lines that vary in length, but tend to be terse. Consequently, much white space surrounds the words of the text, which Robinson explains in an interview with Rosenthal, as indicating her desire to "underline the openness of the page where nothing is said—the listening, but never passive, part of the space" (233). Robinson also identifies the tension between her attraction to both "clean lines and clean language" and the "messiness of experience" in her lyric poetry (Rosenthal 233-34). From the synthesis of formal cleanliness and untidy subject matter, there is, in Rosenthal's words "a carefulness, a lyricism" that emerges in Robinson's poetry, but at the same time "there's often a jarring quality to the juxtapositions, an asserting of unusual links or associations" which results in "a sense of mystery" (234) and a "subtle violence" in the subverted "assumptions about how words go together" (239). Moreover, much of Robinson's poetry has a distinct blend of abstract ideas and description of tangible matter; her diction is

often comprised of simple, concrete nouns that convey commonplace objects. Rosenthal observes Robinson's Celanian tendency to use words that refer to tangible objects such as "tree" and "stone," while at the same time infusing both the words and those objects with a haunting strangeness (249).⁹⁷ Such an intense concentration on select words and their unsettling juxtapositions result in the construction of tonalities that can be alternately strong and subtle.

For example, the opening poem of the 2012 collection *Counterpart*, titled "Turn," provides a powerful image in select, concrete terms. "Turn" illustrates the pursuit of the self through the metaphor of an ingrown seedling whose development is thwarted. Formally, "Turn" is taut, consisting of concise lines of no more than four words each. It offers the images of dual courses for seed development of growth into a seedling or one stunted in its growth cycle. One possible path opens the poem:

The one sharp kernel
makes its bitter
seedling

Seedling
Tendered at the end
of the year. (3)

"Turn" illustrates Robinson's relatively straightforward syntax and clean lines. At the same time, the text demonstrates Rosenthal's observation that, while Robinson deploys diction that

⁹⁷ In her analysis of Robinson's poetry, Morrison examines Robinson's exploration of the perception of objects, in which concrete terms takes on complex resonances. For example, Morrison uses Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theories of perception to explore how Robinson's image of "blanket" in the poem "House" in the collection *Apprehend* "turns us back toward the missed, the missing territory of objects themselves, if only to show us what we no longer see," thus highlighting "the constructed nature of the field of our experience and the objects we perceive to inhabit it" (85-86).

describes objects that are everyday, the poem's descriptions and juxtapositions produce jarring effects; the commonplace transmutes into something uncanny. "Turn" presents two courses for a seed's growth, and yet both seem unnerving: the seed can either grow into a "bitter seedling" which will be "[t]endered" upon conclusion of the year, or a seed that should or could bloom could instead produce only a "green aperture / bitter, tender, self- / pursuing." The seed imagery of "Turn" illustrates the turn inwards as stunted development, a kind of self-encounter as an ingrown failure of production; the only creation is an "aperture" or opening that is "self-pursuing." Initially, one might read the cracked seed as a condemnation of narcissism, for it indicts self-pursuit as a failure to thrive. However, Robinson's description of commonplace objects—both the seedling and cracked seed—as strangely "bitter" outgrowths of a "sharp kernel," resists an easy contrast between a fulfilled bloom and failed seed, and thus produces an ambivalence. The repetition between the terms "bitter" and "tendered"/"tender" underscores the similarities between the two courses of the kernel's development or non-development; both are vulnerable to forces external and internal, and a harshness of conditions is gestured to, but only vaguely, given the poem's sparing use of description and lack of contextual landscape.

Moreover, the two courses of the kernel's development are presented in uncomfortable terms; while the "bitter seedling" fulfills its teleology, this is presented as a course not of fulfillment but exhaustion. The seedling is harvested at the year's end, "Some light / year / closing / wrung out." The closure of harvest becomes "wrung out," or spent. The cracked seed, however, presents a process that is simultaneously off-putting—the imagery of "the green aperture / bitter, tender, self- / pursuing," gestures to development that is thwarted, *ingrown*, perhaps *infected*—and strangely appealing—the cracked seed develops a gap that is at the same time an opening. Unlike its counterpart, the "bitter seedling," the cracked seed has not yet run its

course; it is not tendered, nor has it reached an exhausted closure. The final word of the poem, the gerund “self-pursuing,” indicates that the cracked seed is still in process: moving inwards, to be sure, but through an opening that resists a predetermined or closed course. The jarring imagery of the commonplace objects of kernel, seedling, and cracked seed gestures towards Robinson’s larger project in *Counterpart*: an exploration of self-encounter that reveals it to be alternately appealing, indulgent, disturbing, and urgent.⁹⁸

The environment of “Turn” is exemplary of the settings of many of Robinson’s poems, which often have a denuded quality—that is, both stripped down and timeless. While there are exceptions, many of her poems are not clearly set in a particular historical era, and, consequently, unlike the writings of Rankine and Howe, Robinson’s texts often do not overtly refer to specific political realities. Indeed, her corpus includes many poems that consider myths and narratives from Western biblical, classical, and folk traditions, and re-tell them in a kind of present or simple past tense that appears outside of historical time.⁹⁹ This approach, which lends an atemporal quality to much of her poetry, may make readers suspicious that Robinson’s work is apolitical. However, Robinson does not embrace a formalist or New Critical ideal of stable universal values that transcend historical and geographical conditions. While Robinson’s poetry

⁹⁸ Opening a collection of poetry with the imagery of seeds, seedlings, and plant growth recalls canonical poetic precedents, such as William Carlos Williams eponymous poem from *Spring and All*, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and even as far back as the Prologue to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Unlike Williams’ embrace of the plants’ “stark dignity” as they enter an apparently barren field, Eliot’s dour nihilism as he despairs over the cruelty of lilacs bred out of “the dead land,” and Chaucer’s jubilant and eroticized imagery describing the production of “tendre croppes,” Robinson’s “Turn” is stripped of a descriptive landscape. Absent are references to spring and the cyclicity of the seasons, in either their reassuring or, as in Eliot’s case, inverted forms. Instead, Robinson presents self-pursuit as an ambivalent alternative to the teleology of the seed’s “natural” development.

⁹⁹ For example, the 2002 collection *Apprehend* includes treatments of fairy tales in poems such as “Three Little” and “Hansel and Gretel”; “Badilyah,” from the 2003 collection *Pure Descent*, takes up the Old Testament narrative of the Hebrews wandering in the desert; and her 2012 collection, *Counterpart*, includes “Studies for Hell: III” and “Doppelgänger,” which re-visits the Icarus myth and the myth of Echo and Narcissus, respectively; the latter will be discussed at length in this chapter. Robinson does not treat these narratives as artifacts from the past, nor does she update them with contemporary references. Instead, as Robinson describes it, her poetry considers the ordering and meaning-making structures of these inherited cultural narratives in order to foreground and therefore disorder and disrupt, or at least shift, the meanings of these structures and the language that creates them (Rosenthal 239-41).

avoids overt political stances, she does see her work as concerned, on the level of language, with “undermining groundless assumptions, querying or displacing. ... putting it out of joint. It is a way to create or recirculate, remodel an epistemology” (Rosenthal 229). In contrast with contemporary poets who take explicitly political positions in their poetry, she sees her work as, if not overtly political, nevertheless intrinsically ethical:

I *am* engaged in the conversation—on my own terms. That’s a defiant statement, but hopefully an ethical one. Even to insist that I require a space for my own strategy is my way of insisting that there needs to be many strategies in order to constitute a healthy community. Whether or not you are engaging in a larger politics in the polis, there is an ethical possibility in engaging with language, engaging with relation and possibility in language, that is important. Even the most radical community or paradigm can eventually lapse into assumptiveness. (Rosenthal 245)

This orientation towards ethics is fundamental for Robinson. She earned an MA in ethics, and she describes how she finds inspiration in Retallack’s work on poethics, particular in the aim to resist “ossifying constructs that limit our ability to act as positive agents in an imperiled world” (Rosenthal 237, 235). Robinson’s statements on poetics demonstrate her intention to convey a strong ethical element in her poetry, and thus her writings are ripe for poethical analysis.

An example of Robinson’s poetry that demonstrates the limiting forces of “ossifying constructs,” occurs in poem “Topple,” a re-visitation of the Chicken Little tale from the 2003 collection *Apprehend*. It is an exception that proves the rule; unlike much of her other poetry, “Topple” is “about” a specific political event, 9/11. Unlike Rankine and Howe’s 9/11 poetry, however, it does not allude to any of the geopolitical contexts or specific details of the terrorist

attacks, nor does it explicitly critique the particulars of American government leaders' rhetoric or policies. Instead, "Topple" merges broad strokes of the familiar 9/11 narrative with the Chicken Little tale, and includes commentary that is rather abstract, with its description of "the sky that has fallen" and its aftermath in broad strokes:

...those
who try to tack it up
frustrate the shape it had wished
to be by the one-too-many-fingers
of their own obdurate balance. (65)

Here, the critique that may appear to be leveled at political leadership—that is, "those / who try tack [the sky] up" but only "frustrate the shape it had wished to be" out of their own intransigence. At the same time, the text's criticism broadens to encompass any or all of us who may stubbornly wish to impose our will upon the world. In the interview with Rosenthal, Robinson affirms her distance from overt politicization; about the poem "Topple," she states, "I feel uneasy about it. I tried to tone it down. My concern is that it would seem to grandstand a more politicized position, whereas I tend to feel that poetry is most effective when its politics don't whack the reader over the head, but show some understanding of the inevitable ambiguities that inhere in any circumstance" (Rosenthal 225). Even when treating a specific political event, Robinson's often de-historicized poetry moves towards abstractions and considerations of universal conditions. If we read with the grain of Robinson's own stated intentions for her poetry, which is to interrogate assumptions and circulate a new epistemology—and indeed, that is the approach I take in this project—then her stated interest in ethics and language gesture to a

fruitful means to explore her poethics and demonstrate her texts' relevance to contemporary poetry discourse.¹⁰⁰

Lyric Subjectivity

At this point, I turn to consider Robinson's stated position on lyric subjectivity as it emerges through her literary criticism and poetics. Robinson directly discusses the lyric in a number of essays of both literary criticism and poetics, rejecting conventional ideas of lyric as narrowly epiphanic ("Music Becomes Story" 114) or lyric's commonly conceived status as a "limited convention" which functions "to preserve its small bank of ossified knowledge" ("An Aesthetic" 183). Rather, she sees lyric as often "dexterous...in plumbing epistemological queries" ("An Aesthetic" 183). Robinson's postlanguage revision of the lyric encompasses the concepts of lyric subjectivity and lyric voice. On the one hand, Robinson signals a modernist/Objectivist affinity by aligning herself with Perloff's advocacy of avant-garde experimentalism: "what I mean by *lyric* is an embodiment of thought and experience in the material processes of language. Like Marjorie Perloff, I am leery of an approach to the lyric poem that would base primarily in 'a consistent lyrical voice, a transcendental ego' and prefer, with her, to understand lyric ... as something that reflects the materiality of language" ("Music Becomes Story" 114). On the other hand, Robinson tempers Perloff's stance with a postlanguage reservation that the lyric subject is not to be erased: "[a]t the same time, I am sympathetic to [Elizabeth] Willis's assertion that the lyric poem, while not *self*-expressive per se, reflects the ways 'that ideas of self or voice are never entirely absent from the tonal shadings of language'" ("Music Becomes Story" 114). Robinson instead advances a "stretching (rather than the

¹⁰⁰ I take Lynn Keller's *Thinking Poetry: Readings in Contemporary Women's Exploratory Poetics* as a model for reading with the grain of contemporary poets and considering their own statements on poetics as useful guides for interpretation for their work. One compelling reason to do so is one that Keller states, which is that there has been little critical attention to many of the poets whose work she examines; this is certainly the case for Robinson.

abjuration) of lyric subjectivity” (“Music Becomes Story” 115). Robinson’s refusal to dismiss all “ideas of self or voice” within the lyric brushes up against what she calls the taboo against the lyric “I” in turn-of-the-twenty-first century experimental writing (Rosenthal 250).

Robinson engages with contemporary poetic discourse through a recalibration of the lyric. In particular, as a postlanguage poet, Robinson both retains and revises the lyric “I.” In a critical essay on mystical poetry, Robinson argues, “those who disdain the lyric ‘I’ for its presumptuous, epiphanic point of view haven’t properly considered the ways that locating the movement of a poem within a persona can stretch and dislocate that ‘I’ in surprising, refreshing ways” (“Persona” 101). Further, Robinson offers Howe’s poetry as an example of lyric that “elucidates that the speaking ‘I’ is essentially exploratory, even playful, and creatively irresolute” (“Persona” 98). Like Howe and Rankine, Robinson also seeks to articulate a lyric “I” that acknowledges the engagement with alterity as a central element of subjectivity. In a critical essay on the poetry of Lorine Niedecker, Robinson references critic Daniel Barbiero’s definition of “lyric as circumspective (as opposed to introspective),” a discussion I cited at length in the introduction and chapter one of this dissertation. The circumspective lyric, that is, the extension of the lyric subject toward alterity, has the potential to be ethical, as Robinson advances, in an explanation of “postmodern poetics,” through her citation of poet-critic Ann Lauterbach’s essay “Is ‘I’ an Other?”: “If the ‘I’ finds its way out of the egotistical sublime and toward the alterity implied by all imaginative acts, then it will once again initiate paths away from self-absorbed narcissism to a recognition of the linguistic matrix that binds us to each other and to the world” (39) (“Persona” 101). A lyric “I” that engages with and is constituted through alterity—especially the “linguistic matrix” in which we all participate—has the potential to be ethical in its other-orientation rather than inward, self-absorbed, and narcissistic. If Robinson clearly

articulates her position on the lyric “I” in her critical writings, how is this other-oriented lyric “I” constructed and explored in her own lyric poetry? What are the ethical implications of Robinson’s own lyric “I”?

One poem in *Counterpart*, “I,” offers a productive entry into Robinson’s investigation of lyric subjectivity, for it demonstrates Robinson’s postlanguage stance by advocating for both the revision and restoration of the lyric “I.” “I” appears in a poetic sequence, “The Golem,” which is named after, and gives homage to, Gustav Meyrink’s 1917 supernatural, German-language novel, *Der Golem*. Meyrink’s *Der Golem* references and revises Central European golem legends, in which a rabbi creates a clay figure as a servant and/or Jewish protector figure through the magical use of language. In *Der Golem*, the golem eventually is revealed to be the unnamed protagonist’s *doppelgänger*, or double. In Robinson’s poetic sequence, “The Golem,” each individual poem is named for the English translations of the chapter titles in the Dover edition of *The Golem*. Robinson’s poem, “I,” is named after the third chapter of the novel, which in fact refers to the letter “I” that is stitched on the cover of a mysterious book that the protagonist is given near the beginning of the novel. The protagonist brings the book to get the “I” on the cover repaired. With the poetic sequence “The Golem,” readers can glimpse the dense level of intertextuality that permeates many of Robinson’s writings and *Counterpart* in particular.

“I” also demonstrates Robinson’s concentration on matters of textuality, that is, her stated efforts to query conventional, “ossified” concepts and thus open possibilities for new understanding. With the opening lines, “One site in the alphabet / needs mending,” the poem “I” implicitly draws from *The Golem*’s plot about the book cover repair and plays on the chapter title from the Dover edition to reference the flashpoint debate in experimental poetry circles, the presence of the lyric “I.” The current status of the lyric “I” is broken, but rather than discarding

the “I,” it needs to be fixed. “I” then presents multiple images of doubles or repetitions to explore the “I”:

What might be provender

releases its dissimilar

twin: empty hourglass

upended. (21)

The image of the “empty hourglass” alludes to how the lyric “I” often draws on the assumption that the first person singular pronoun provides an exact mirror of the writing subject. The hourglass’s emptiness provides a metaphor of stagnation, in which the conventional lyric “I”—the one in need of repair—is a subject that does not dynamically flow through time, but has been hollowed out, in an image of stasis and vacuity. The conventional lyric expectation of the “I” as static, however, is “upended”; far from being “provender,” or a foodstuff, which can be readily consumed and digested, the “I” *in language* “releases” a “twin” who is in fact “dissimilar.” Yet, the poem’s conclusion advocates for the “restoration of the letter,” that is, the revision of our understanding of what the lyric “I” can do. In order to restore it, “the echoes,” or repetitions, must “unravel,” “stitch / by stitch to make such cloak” to be worn by the lyric subject. This image of the unraveled/mended/fabricated cloak implies that, rather than be considered a self-same double of the poet, the lyric “I” should be more properly compared to a garment to be (de)constructed, cast off, and worn anew.

Robinson’s reference to *The Golem* to approach the issue of the lyric “I” is an intriguing choice, both in its use of a literary figure that is deployed as a *doppelgänger* and its allusions to the significance of language in construction of ideas and identities. In terms of language,

Elizabeth Roberts Bair observes, in the golem tales, “we see the centrality of the Hebrew alphabet in the act of creation: whether it be the chanting of magical verses, the placing of the *shem* (a paper on which God’s name is written) in the clay man’s mouth, or the carving of the word *emeth* (life) in his forehead, the alphabet brings him to life” (19). In “I,” with its insistence on the significance of the “alphabet,” Robinson implicitly draws on *The Golem* to compare the lyric “I” to a golem, a literary double figure created through the power of language both to correspond and *not* correspond to its creator at the same time. Furthermore, the golem as *doppelgänger*, echoes, and the mirror images of “dissimilar twin” and “empty hourglass” are only a few of the references to doubles in *Counterpart*. While the lyric “I,” in what is conventionally presumed to indicate isolation and autonomy, might be a site that “needs mending,” in *Counterpart*, Robinson continues to “unravel the echoes” by exploring the inherent doubleness of the (lyric) subject.

Literary Doubles

Robinson confronts the twenty-first century taboo of lyric self-exploration directly in *Counterpart*. However, *Counterpart* does not provide an enactment of lyric self-exploration, articulated by a first-person subject, as an ultimately comforting experience, enclosed with a narrative arc that resolves in an epiphany or otherwise clear conclusion. Instead, through the citation of other writers’ texts and a series of lyrics that at times do and at times do not deploy the lyric “I,” self-encounter is thematized in *Counterpart* as an unsettling and fraught experience that defies tidy resolution. In these poems, to encounter the self is to confront danger in the form of the double, to risk sliding into the temptations of narcissism; as “Turn” demonstrates, moving inward involves the chance of becoming malformed, ingrown, infected. Robinson draws on tropes of doubleness, including the supernatural figures of *doppelgänger*s and the mythical

figures of Narcissus, and Echo, to advance a postlanguage lyric poetry that makes the case for the lyric “I” as indicating both the presence *and* absence of the poet/self that the “I” signifies. Robinson’s poetry acknowledges the narcissistic impulse towards lyric self-replication while advancing a lyric poetry in which self-encounter revises the doubleness of self-reflection as a means to incorporate alterity within poetic language and lyric subjectivity, and therefore indicate the ethical possibilities of self-exploration. *Counterpart* as the title of the collection signals the idea that introspection involves the exploration of the counterparts we all carry within. Self-exploration necessarily involves distance and difference, and if one recognizes the alterity of the internal counterpart, then introspection need not be merely narcissistic inwardness; the introspective and circumspective may be intertwined.

Robinson’s use of the *doppelgänger* figure draws from a motif popular in nineteenth-century gothic and horror literature, in which a fictional character encounters his or her double and reacts with terror (Gonzales 119). As critics Paul Gordon and Andrew Hock Soon Ng observe, within literary criticism, the trope of the *doppelgänger* or double usually centers on questions of subjectivity by analyzing fictional characters and personae of “uncanny literature” through psychoanalytic theory (Gordon 12; Ng 1, 5). These psychoanalytic readings are rooted in Freud’s 1919 essay “The Uncanny,” where the *doppelgänger* figure lurks within his theory of the uncanny, or “feeling of ‘dread and creeping horror’” that emerges in encounters with the eerily familiar (Ng 5; Castle 7). While, in “The Uncanny,” Freud alludes to the notion, rooted in European folklore, that an individual’s encounter with one’s double signifies a terrifying omen of one’s death, Terry Castle observes that Freud’s “colorful theory of the *doppelgänger*” theorizes a return of the repressed in the post-Enlightenment historical era (9). Consequently, in late twentieth and early twentieth-century literary criticism, the *doppelgänger* is typically read in

gothic, supernatural, or horror literature such as *Frankenstein*, *Jekyll and Hyde*, and *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* through the lens of psychoanalytical criticism to demonstrate that “the double is no longer a nemesis without, but has become an enemy within, a shadowy other residing within the psyche, threatening to disrupt the stability and coherence of the self” (Ng 3).

While criticism of the literary double is dominated by psychoanalytic theory and is largely character-driven (Ng 3),¹⁰¹ Gordon and Ng call for alternative critical understandings of the trope of doubleness to include considerations of language and rhetoric rather than analysis of characterization alone. Gordon draws on theories by twentieth century Continental philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida to develop a deconstructive model of the “critical double,” which he identifies “with the way all literary and rhetorical texts utilize structures of meaning to deny the very structures of meaning on which they are based” (12). Ng builds on Gordon’s argument as he asserts that, when considering the double, not only the psychological states of literary characters but “the act of writing (together with its ideological thrust)” should be investigated as well (4). In Ng’s words, “more than just a particular feature recurrent in Gothic literature, doubleness is a fundamental aspect in all writings” (5). Gordon and Ng both draw from Derrida and his notion of writing/language as mimicry which, counter to the Platonic conception of *mimesis* as the imitation of a “simple” or singular original that exists in reality, instead theorizes a “mimicry imitating nothing ... a double that doubles no simple ... nothing at least that is not itself already double” (“The Double Session” 206). Derrida emphasizes intertextuality: all texts begin as at least double, for they stand in relation to what has preceded them. Instead of a manifested truth or an “adequation between a presence and a representation”

¹⁰¹ For examples of literary criticism that uses psychoanalytic criticism to investigate the figure of the double, see Eugene Crook, *Fearful Symmetry: Doubles and Doubling in Literature and Film*, Tallahassee: UP Florida, 1981; Andrew J. Webber, *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions of German Literature*, Oxford, Clarendon P, 1996; and Andrew Smith, *Gothic Radicalism: Literature, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis in the Nineteenth Century*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.

there is no reality reflected or produced by language, “nothing other than the space of writing” (“The Double Session” 208). Ng draws on Derrida’s ideas in “The Double Session” to assert that, “[o]n a rhetorical level, the doubleness ... inherent in language is precisely its ability to both mimic the object signified, as well as refuse, or deny this identification” (7).

The Derridean-influenced concept of the “critical double” of language is productive for a treatment of Robinson’s use of the double because inherent in *Counterpart*’s explorations of self-encounter is the idea of language as always double/plural; rather than stable and ossified, language can always be constructively dislocated to open to new possibilities. Furthermore, Ng’s concept of the “literary double” and Derrida’s treatment of doubleness as an essential element in all writing are productive concepts for my investigation of Robinson’s use of the trope of doubleness in her treatment of the lyric subject because Derrida and Ng’s theories represent an alternative to the psychoanalytic model of the double as alter ego:

In the case of the literary double, its presence at once suggests a rupture, or split, in the self, as well as points to, when considered alongside the self, a fusion, or consummation with the self. Or to state it in a different way: the double, because it announces the incompleteness of the self, is therefore ultimately *not* the “other” of the self (although this is how the double is normally viewed) but is integral to *self* ... As such, desire is not located in an alter-ego, but within the very ego itself, which now functions as both the locus of desire and satisfaction, presence and nonpresence. (Ng 6-7)

Ng’s articulation of a Derridean “literary double” provides a valuable means of considering Robinson’s tropes of doubleness: *doppelgängers*, echoes, and mirror-images. In Robinson’s

work, the literary double both “announces the incompleteness of the self,” and investigates the lyric “I” as a site which is “the locus of ... presence and nonpresence,” identity and alterity.

Self-Encounter in Counterpart

Counterpart opens with a pair of epigraphs by Charles Baudelaire and Barbara Guest. These epigraphs appear together on the opening page, and are themselves inexact counterparts that frame the subsequent text: they both take up the theme of self-exploration, but from different angles of approach. The initial epigraph includes an excerpt from Baudelaire’s poem “Man and Sea” from *Flowers of Evil*, “*You find it pleasing to plunge into the bosom of your image*” (1). This quote includes the Symbolist poet’s unnerving address to the reader, “you,” whom Baudelaire frames in his collection’s opening as a double—at once “hypocrite lecteur” and “sembable,” or counterpart, to the poet himself. The epigraph by Baudelaire describes a self-encounter in which the mirror image serves as both the subject’s double and object of desire: Baudelaire indicates a scene of narcissistic fusion in which the poet and reader are both implicated.

However, Robinson explores the matter of doubling and self-encounter further. The following epigraph, from Barbara Guest’s 1978 novel *Seeking Air*, acknowledges self-encounter as an experience both disturbing and necessary:

The sense of becoming disturbingly real to yourself, that point where the interior conversations begin, like daylight picking its way over a bridge, over there to the further shore to shine its brightest. The difficult shell halved and the sparse interior looked into, a voice appearing and disappearing with the light that fell on one’s single self. Difficult to arrange this monodony. A necessity, the act of discovering where the self starts, hears itself, and repeats the instructions. (1)

The two epigraphs, taken together, capture the paradoxical strains of closeness and distance, fusion and rupture, singularity and doubleness within self-encounter—and, I argue, by extension, lyric self-exploration. The Baudelaire epigraph highlights the pleasure of “*plunging into the bosom of your own image*,” a phrase that emphasizes the encounter with one’s double or “image” as a supreme *indulgence*, for it alludes to experiences of aquatic immersion and sexual consummation. However, this is to speak in a paradox: an image is typically thought to be all surface, to have no depth in which to plunge. On the other hand, the Guest epigraph emphasizes self-encounter not so much as indulgence as distance by using the image of “daylight picking its way over a bridge, over there to the further shore to shine its brightest.” The metaphor of daylight across a bridge indicates spatial references to both gaps and linkages: daylight emanates from a distant source to illuminate the bridge, and shines the brightest on the “further shore”; illumination is made possible only through separation. Instead of Baudelaire’s indulgent pleasure of fusion, the Guest epigraph emphasizes self-discovery as a difficult and ongoing process, for while the bridge signals the possibility of access, it also indicates the great travel/travail required in “the act of discovering where the self starts.” The search for the self—or the source of the self—in Guest’s terms is thus not the same as the Baudelairean indulgence in one’s image/reflection/double. Instead, in the Guest epigraph, self-exploration is a “necessity” that insists upon the significance of interiority, albeit one accessed through division and therefore doubleness: “one’s single self” is likened to a shell that is “halved”; the “sparse interior looked into” involves the self as both examined and examiner; “interior conversations” refer to a dialogue within the self. The references to both singularity and doubleness in *Counterpart*’s opening epigraphs indicate that encounter with the self is not straightforward. In Ng’s terms,

self-encounter may involve the fusion and consummation the self, as Baudelaire highlights, but it also involves the self's interior split and rupture, as Guest emphasizes.

Furthermore, in the Guest epigraph, language is integral to self-encounter, for Guest presents an exploration of “the point where interior conversations begin” and identifies “a voice appearing and disappearing” in a difficult “monodony,” or single-voiced chant. A kind of primal communication occurs, within a self who is both speaking/chanting and hearing, which signals an internal division between speaker/chanter and listener. Furthermore, the phrase, “repeats the instructions,” signifies that “interior conversations” are in fact rooted in echoes or mimicry. Thus the epigraph by Guest illustrates a conviction that a subject's interiority is significant—one should pay attention to it and “repeat the “instructions”—and, it is implied, should follow them. At the same time, self-encounter can never result in a direct or transparent *expression* of the subject's interiority, for it involves the Derridean “notion of writing/language as mimicry”—that is language, even when emerging within the self, is never pure, “original” speech; repetition is always involved. With these two epigraphs, Robinson presents the boundary that her poems tread within *Counterpart*. As Baudelaire charges, self-encounter involves the temptation to plunge narcissistically into one's own image. At the same time, self-encounter is a “necessity,” one that involves paying attention to one's “*interior conversations*,” and using language to “repeat the instructions,” which acknowledges the doubleness inherent in that very language. Furthermore, while the direction in both epigraphs appears to be inward, Guest's epigraph recognizes *difference* both within the self and the language that emerges from self-encounter. Therefore, in the opening epigraph pair, Robinson indicates that even self-encounter involves division and encounter with otherness.

Robinson takes up the opening epigraphs' themes of doubleness within both self-encounter and language in the poem "Doppelgänger." The text uses the myth of Narcissus and Echo to resist ideas of fixed identity, self-absorbed inwardness, and "ossified" uses of language as they may surface in lyric poetry. As with "Turn," Robinson alludes to disease and decay to explore unhealthy self-pursuit; as with "I," Robinson uses the images of doubles, mirrors and repetitions. "Doppelgänger" begins by invoking echoes:

Cure the echo.

Identical merges with identity.

one holds in one's body (Twin, Irony, Narcissus)

like its own

trinket, a name repeated. (43)

Each of these statements is surrounded by large amounts of white space, which allows them to be absorbed by extensive pauses in the act of reading, lending them substantial gravity and creating a tone that is serious, even weighty in its pronouncements. The imperative to "Cure the echo" in the opening line characterizes the echo as a use of language that is a kind of disease in need of remedy. If an instance of language is an echo, it is trapped in a cycle of mere repetition, allowing for no difference. Language that is only an echo is a problem as it is connected to the idea of the self's "identity" as "identical," or fixed and self-same, rather than dynamic and open to alterity. I suggest that this is a reference to the conventional view that the lyric "I" is identical with the writing subject, which is thereby likened to an illness in need of cure. Acts of doubling that "one

holds in one's body" are parenthetically described in metaphorical, linguistic, and mythic terms, "(Twin, Irony, Narcissus)," both observing the multiple ways that the concept of doubleness permeates the imagination and language and asserting that the idea of doubleness is so naturalized it is virtually embodied. Furthermore, the concept of a fixed identity is protected as a "trinket," or possession held against a body, that is, as "a name repeated," or continually reinforced through reiteration. The references to the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus and Echo usher in archetypes that stand in for a dangerously self-absorbed view of lyric subjectivity as "reflecting" the subject, and, thereby, a view of language reduced to the circumscribed contours of mere self-replication.

Later in the poem, Robinson alludes more extensively to the narrative of the myth of what she calls "Arid Narcissus" who "loves this delusion":

the sound of collision
with the water's surface,

the isolation
of precise sameness

battering itself. Absolute. (46)

The text refers to the ending of the version of the Narcissus myth in which he dies by drowning in his own reflection in the water where he has been gazing. Narcissus's self-indulgent and delusional love of the counterpart that he finds in his reflection leads to his death. In these lines, Robinson plays with dry and wet imagery. "Arid Narcissus," whose self-absorption is linked with both desiccation and infertility, denies the possibility of (re)production of anything that is

other than himself. Water, which could provide a remedy to his aridity, is instead the substance that both supplies his delusion and kills him. Robinson's stark word choice and brief line length—"the isolation / of precise sameness / battering itself"—emphasizes the severity of Narcissus's simultaneous self-pursuit and self-annihilation. I read the figure of "Arid Narcissus" as standing in for the conventional view of the lyric "I" that is a presumed reflection of the writing subject—a construct that is indeed often accused as evidence of the poet's narcissism and self-aggrandizement. "Doppelgänger" both draws on this association and inverts it, associating the conventional lyric "I" with sterility and, ultimately, self-annihilation.

This passage counters images of dry sterility by alluding to the soggy mess of translation:

How better to translate

Than to destroy.

The shape of equivalents

is garbled with wet

like the synonym for 'evaporate.' (46)

In opposition to the destructiveness of narcissistic reflection and the isolation of echoes, "Doppelgänger" poses the possibility of translation and the search for "equivalents"—that is, the attempt to approximate alterity through language, however imperfect that process. With the terms "translate," "equivalents," and "synonym," "Doppelgänger" foregrounds a Derridean understanding of language as always an approximation, never establishing "precise sameness" with the object signified. The contrast between destructive aridity and life-giving water is extended in the lines "[t]he shape of equivalents / is garbled with wet / like the synonym for 'evaporate.'" The term "evaporate" itself may, like its possible synonyms—disperse, vanish,

dissipate—indicate the apparent disappearance of water into the atmosphere, but, in Derridean fashion, the concept of the dehydrating process of evaporation always depends upon, and carries a trace of, its polar opposite, hydration. Furthermore, the word “garbled” introduces the concept of lack of clarity, textual error, and inaccurate transmission, thus reinforcing the idea that an exact counterpart in language is impossible. Nevertheless, translation, the incorporation of synonyms or non-exact “equivalents,” whose meanings may dissipate into plurality and inexactitude, is the only fruitful, life-giving alternative to “the isolation / of precise sameness / battering itself.” “Doppelgänger” thus thematizes a Derridean embrace of language as inherently double in “its ability to both mimic the object signified, as well as refuse, or deny this identification” (Ng 7). If we apply the Derridean concept of the doubleness of language to lyric poetry and the configuration of the lyric “I” in language, we see that Robinson’s text poses a self-conscious, revised deployment of the lyric “I” as always an equivalent, a double that is not precisely the same as the original writing subject, but that thereby enables productive explorations of the subject and his or her surroundings.

The conclusion of “Doppelgänger” expands upon the narcissistic vision of self-destruction by implicitly drawing on the folkloric idea of the *doppelgänger* as a paranormal double, that is, an omen of bad luck, danger, or death:

Filigree of capillaries
reduced to a pulse. All flesh

blanched by exposure
to its own witness

and stripped

away. (47)

This final stanza continues the theme of the aridity and desiccation of narcissism, but whereas Narcissus “loves this delusion”—that his reflection is real—the final lines allude to the *doppelgänger* as the omen of death that Narcissus fails to realize. The lines “[a]ll flesh / blanched by exposure / to its own witness,” recall a classic scene of a spooked character who might blanch, or turn pale, at the frightful encounter with his or her own *doppelgänger*. However, Robinson extrapolates the sense of “blanch” to indicate not only whitening by removing color, but also the stripping away of flesh and the removal of blood as “(f)ilgree of capillaries” are “reduced to a pulse.” These images reinforce the enervating effects of lyric poetry that aims to reflect the conventional lyric subject in its unitary, “precise sameness.” Formally, this final stanza enacts the content: centered, rather than aligned at either of the margins, it allows for a visual immediacy of how the length of the final six lines increasingly diminish in from eight syllables to two, and in the final five lines, the word count decreases from six to one. This enactment of diminishment in the final lines of the poem further underscores thematic imperative in “Doppelgänger” to re-think conventional lyric self-reflection as, paradoxically, not aggrandizement but depletion of the lyric subject.

Intertextuality and Poethics

“I” and “Doppelgänger” are examples of lyric poems where Robinson draws on the figure of the double to explore the issues of language in lyric, particularly the construction of the lyric “I.” As mentioned in my earlier discussion of “I,” in *Counterpart*, Robinson includes layers of intertextuality through many citations of other writers that take up the theme of doubles, echoes, and mirror images. Throughout *Counterpart*, these citations recur between individual

poems or poetic sequences, sometimes alone on a page, or, as with the opening epigraphs by Baudelaire and Guest, set in pairs. These citations include references to the self-encounter with a *doppelgänger*, as in a quote from twentieth century surrealist author Leonora Carrington that appears early in *Counterpart*: “As I drew near the fire the woman stopped stirring the pot and rose to greet me. When we faced each other I felt my heart give a convulsive leap and stop. The woman who stood before me was me” (16). This quote, from 1976 Carrington’s fantastic novel, *The Hearing Trumpet*, presents an encounter with the narrator’s *doppelgänger* as uncanny. Quotes such as these contribute to the overall atmosphere of mystery in *Counterpart*, which allows a space for the exploration of weird and even supernatural forces. However, not all allusions to doubling involve straightforward *doppelgänger* scenarios. Another citation that appears earlier in *Counterpart* comes from contemporary experimental poet Martha Ronk, and simultaneously gestures toward and denies an encounter with a *doppelgänger*: “We say it looks familiar but not my face and not / looking where one thinks to see it / and not in the window passing quickly by” (5). This quote, from Ronk’s 2004 poetry collection, *In a Landscape of Having to Repeat*, indicates that the presence of any double is always at play with its absence: the double “looks familiar” but is “not my face”; we are “not looking where one thinks to see it,” and “it” is “not in the window passing quickly by”—denials of increasing specificity which insist on an *absence* and nevertheless gesture towards the *presence* of a figure eerily similar to the lyric “I.” The theme of a double that is both absent and present is alluded to again in a quote from post-war poet Edward Jabes’ text, *The Book of Questions*: “‘Have you thought,’ said Reb Sia to his New Year’s guests, ‘of the importance of the shadow? It is reflection and the sacrifice of reflection. It is man’s double and negation.’ But do not believe that madness has ever left us. Like pain, it lies in wait for us at each stage, I mean each time we run up against the word

hidden in the word, the being buried in the being" (42). The shadow as a figure of mimicry, "*man's double*," gestures to both a simulation of the self that is signified and also, as "*man's... negation*," denial of this identification. The shadow as both "*double and negation*" and the reference to "*the word hidden in the word*" encourages a reading of doubleness that underscores a Derridean interplay of presence *and* absence as well as repetition *and* difference within language. Taken together, these citations from other writers in *Counterpart* support an ongoing argument that the lyric "I," the image/reflection/shadow of the self as it appears in language, can be read as a *doppelgänger*: the lyric "I" seems like the self, but it is never a perfect replica. Language cannot create an exact counterpart. Instead, language, as mimicry, allows for the identification of the writing self with the lyric "I" and the revelation of the difference between the two.

Part of the way that *Counterpart*, repairs the conventional lyric "I" is through the text's high degree of intertextuality. In my exploration of Robinson's work thus far, I have alternated between looking at some of her lyric poetry and her text's reliance on citation of texts by other writers. Indeed, Robinson's extensive intertextuality is a crucial part of her poethics, for it conveys poetry-making as a communal, collaborative activity that necessarily involves reading and responding to other writers. In the interview with Rosenthal, Robinson states that she sees writing as an intrinsically ethical practice, and places a high value on engaging within writing communities as part of the writing process. For example, she contrasts her approach with that of the twentieth-century religious thinker Simone Weil, whose work she admires, but whose isolation Robinson sees as a dead end, for Weil's efforts "resulted in an isolation that is counter to what I've found as the vexed best that any practice (artistic or religious) can offer, which is a *communal* experience" (Rosenthal 232). Robinson continues: "I place an extremely high value

on community and I would argue that poetry-making is not a solitary but a communal activity. Part of our ethical work as writers, if you will, is to engage with that, to be good readers and responders, to participate in some way” (Rosenthal 253).¹⁰² *Counterpart* not only cites the writers of Symbolist, Surrealist and/or fantastic literature I have already cited, but also many contemporary poets, both “experimental” and “lyric,” including Dennis Phillips, James Thomas Stevens, Kazim Ali, Ed Smallfield, Laura Moriarity, Craig Watson, and Pat Reed. The intertextuality of this poetry collection exemplifies Retallack’s interest in contemporary poetry that “move[s] away from models of cultural and political agency lodged in isolated heroic acts” (3). Instead, *Counterpart* emerges from “a dynamic equilibrium between intention and receptivity, community and alterity” and illustrates “[c]ollaborative, conversational values” (3). Robinson’s quotation of multiple writers, including both canonical modernist writers and less widely read contemporary poets, demonstrate her commitment to poetic composition as a process that emerges within a larger writing community.

Furthermore, *Counterpart* is highly intertextual in that several of the poems center on other texts. Two poems are in homage to early-twentieth-century spiritualist fantasy novels that center on a *doppelgänger* figure—the aforementioned Gustav Meyrink’s 1917 *Der Golem* and the English writer Charles Williams’ 1937 *Descent into Hell*—and a third is dedicated to Eliseo Subiela’s 1986 Argentine film *Man Facing Southeast*. However, Robinson’s citations are provocatively limited; with all of the epigraphs, the writer is cited, but the titles of individual books and poems are not. While these citations are rooted in complex theoretical and aesthetic discussions, the absence of a detailed bibliography downplays *Counterpart* as an “academic” or

¹⁰² Robinson has participated in the praxis of developing writing communities while she was a poet in the Bay Area by working on the magazine *26* with Rusty Morrison, Brian Strang, and Joseph Noble, and Instance Press with Beth Anderson and Stacy Szymazcek, as well as hosting poetry readings (Rosenthal 253).

scholarly project, and emphasizes Robinson's creative participation in various artistic and spiritual strains in the writing process.¹⁰³ I suggest that Robinson's intertextuality as demonstrated through the formation of lyric poems in response to other artworks illustrate Attridge's concept of innovative and creative reading and writing practices that emerge from a reader's responsibility (29). These lyrics as creative response represent another way, in addition to epigraphs, that Robinson's poetry signals composition as rooted in a kind of indirect collaboration rather than individualistic pursuit.

On Ghosts: Haunting, Subjectivity, and Alterity

With the doppelgängers of *Counterpart*, Robinson engages with the supernatural double as a literary trope that enables an exploration of lyric, language, and subjectivity. Robinson's conjuring of the supernatural continues in the 2013 collection, *On Ghosts*, a mixed genre collection of essay, memoir, and poetry wherein Robinson deploys the figure of the ghost to investigate how subjectivity is shaped through encounters with the spectral Other in both personal experiences and texts. Robinson also extends her inquiry into the development of the lyric, particularly the processes of poetic composition, reception, and translation, by using the trope of haunting to illustrate the interplay between the presence and absence of a writing subject within a text. With her use of the ghost as literary trope, she follows Jack Spicer, a poetic predecessor whom she calls a "foundational" poet for her own writing in her interview with the Poetry Society of America, and whom she cites in an epigraph of the opening page of *On Ghosts*.¹⁰⁴ In a critical essay, "Persona and the Mystical Poem," Robinson argues that Spicer's

¹⁰³ The two novels and this film that Robinson devotes tribute poems to incorporate fantasy elements and share strong overtones of spiritualism—that is, they are spiritualist in the sense that they convey the belief that the spirit is a crucial element of reality, and they incorporate references to occult beliefs, theological issues, and religious allegory.

¹⁰⁴ The opening epigraph reads as follows: "*I am the ghost of answering questions. Beware me. / Keep me at a distance as I keep you at a distance.*" —Jack Spicer

poetry reveals that “the figures of the mirror and the ghost” can indicate “the reflective and haunting functions of poetry are not merely reiterations of the self, but revelatory sites of deformation” (94). Correspondingly, in *On Ghosts*, the trope of the ghost allows for the configuration of a subjectivity that, far from simply straightforward or self-present, is dislocated and (de)formed by encounters with alterity. I further suggest Robinson’s exploration of ghosting in poetry advances a poetics that accords with Derrida’s ideas of literature as “hauntological” insofar as it takes up the play between presence and absence, being and non-being. *Hauntology* figures the literary as an in-between space where writers haunt readers, and are haunted in turn, through the activities of writing, reading and citation of literary texts. As Derridean hauntology fundamentally involves an ethical injunction to treat the non-living Other with responsibility and respect, Robinson’s lyrical, essayistic exploration of ghosting advances an ethics compatible with Derrida’s hauntological ethics and his ethics of hospitality—that is, a radical hospitality of visitation that builds on Levinasian ethics of responsibility to the Other.

Presence, Absence, and the Ethics of Hauntology

The event of haunting indicates the presence of ghost, and the concept of “presence” plays a key role in both Robinson’s and Derrida’s writings. In the critical essay, “Persona and the Mystical Poem,” Robinson affirms the value of mysticism as “an experience of presence or union that resists rational explanation; I do not find it necessary to make explicit a divinity or religion tradition or practice in this definition” (92). Furthermore, for Robinson, “presence” is intrinsic to poetry’s worth: “[p]resence, as itchy as that word is, provides, in my estimation, the most enduring value of poetry. Correspondingly, that poetry can register many sorts of presence is a sign of its hardness” (93). On the other hand, Derrida notably critiques Western philosophy, theology, and language for being fundamentally and fallaciously metaphysical—that is,

erroneously assuming and overly valuing presence.¹⁰⁵ However, while Derrida might seem to resist the notion of presence in his deconstructive investigation of binaries, he does not simply invert hierarchies and therefore does not simply reject presence and embrace absence. Instead, Derrida's writings suggest "the difference between presence and absence ... needs to be re-thought in a new way" (Shakespeare 56).¹⁰⁶

Hauntology represents a significant development in Derrida's re-thinking of presence and absence that occurs in the later stages of his career. Derrida coins the term hauntology in his 1993 volume of essays, *Specters of Marx*.¹⁰⁷ Like the famous Derridean concept, *différance*, hauntology is rooted in a play on words: the pronunciation of the French term *hantologie* sounds indistinguishable from the term "ontology," the study of being; hauntology, centering on the absent/present ghost figure, therefore displaces ontology and the primacy of presence (Davis 8, 9).¹⁰⁸ Accordingly, Derrida's conception of the ghost or specter is a "deconstructive figure ... [who makes] established certainties vacillate" (Davis 11). The unstable terrain where Derridean ghosts haunt is expansive, reaching into translation, phenomenology, history, capitalism, etc. Most relevant to my project, Derrida's absent/present, existent/non-existent specter has

¹⁰⁵ In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida argues that the oppressive "logocentrism," which is also the "phonocentrism" of the Western metaphysical tradition, equates being and meaning with "*presence*" (11-12). As Gayatri Spivak explains, logocentrism emerges from "the human desire to posit a 'central' presence at the beginning and the end" and the "authorizing pressure" of the center gives rise to hierarchized oppositions" such as presence and absence, being and non-being, speech and writing, in which the inferior term buttresses the superior term and is marked as a fall (lxvii-lxix).

¹⁰⁶ There are theological implications in Derrida's rejection of pure absence, for it means, as Shakespeare observes, Derrida does not simply reject theism and replace it with relativism, nihilism, or atheism (56). Thus is it not a necessary contradiction to apply Derrida's ideas to Robinson, who embraces a mystical/theological approach to many of her writings.

¹⁰⁷ The overtly political argument in *Specters*—which was written and published in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the apparent triumph of Western capitalism—is that deconstruction had always been a radicalization of Marxist thought. In the reception of *Specters*, many left-leaning intellectuals have taken serious issue with Derrida's claim to Marxism (Davis 8). In addition to the overtly political argument of *Specters*, Derrida devotes considerable space to developing a theory of the ghost, or specter, and applying it to many fields, including literature.

¹⁰⁸ Davis notes that there are in fact two sources of *hauntology*: that rooted in Derrida's work and a more obscure strain developed by the psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, which focuses on transgenerational trauma and the excavation of family secrets (9-10). I focus on Derridean hauntology for this dissertation.

implications for literary language. Within literary criticism in the past fifteen years, a number of critics have linked the “theme (haunting, ghosts, the supernatural) and the processes of literature and textuality in general” (Davis 11). Literary critics who use Derridean hauntology as an interpretive lens assert that textuality itself is hauntological as it pivots between existence and non-existence and consequently indicates “the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not-yet formulated possibilities of the future” (Davis 13).¹⁰⁹

Derridean hauntology is fundamentally rooted in ethics and is thus well suited for literary-ethical inquiry. As Derrida pronounces in the exordium to *Specters*, “[i]f it—learning to live—remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. ... So it would be necessary to learn spirits ... to live *with* ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No,

¹⁰⁹ Derrida’s development of hauntology is only one critical strain of critical methodologies that take up ghosts. Helen Sword, whose 2002 book, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, explores the influence of spiritualism in modernist aesthetics, provides an illuminating overview of contemporary literary criticism that centers on ghosts, haunting, spiritualism, and a broad array of interactions between the living and the dead. In addition to poststructuralist critics who have developed Derrida’s ideas of the *hauntological*, critics from a variety of methodological persuasions have taken up the ghosts: “For feminist literary critics such as Diana Basham and Bette London, spirit mediumship offers a useful paradigm for exploring relationships between authorial empowerment and the politics of gender. For postcolonial critics such as Patrick Bantlinger, Marjorie Howes, and Gauri Viswanathan, likewise, spiritualism and the occult provide frames of reference for understanding the paradoxes implicit in imperialist doctrines of cultural conquest and hegemony. For Marxist critics such as Jeff Nunokawa and Andrew H. Miller, ghosts stand in for any of the various cultural agents that exceed and outlast their own origins, acting upon society yet refusing embodiment: capital, imagination, fame. For queer theorists such as Terry Castle, Hugh Stevens, and Patricia White, ghostliness represents not only a symptom of repression ... but also, more ominously, a return of the repressed ... Similarly, for psychoanalytic critics such as Marjorie Garber and Jacqueline Rose, haunting signals a repetition compulsion, defined by Freud not only as a return of the repressed but also as a constituent element of the uncanny... For sociologists such as Avery F. Gordon and ethnologists such as Christine Berge, the conjuration of spirits is a compensatory gesture, a reaction against various social pressures; Berge argues, for instance, that spirit mediums ‘escape the mortuary grip’ of industrialism by turning themselves into ‘spiritual machines’ who can therefore better control their own fate. And finally, for cryptographic critics such as Nicolas Abraham, Maria Torok, and Shawn Rosenheim, ghosts affirm the interpretive imperative of all modern existence, communicating in code (raps, knocks, anagrams, opaque metaphors) from beyond or within the mysterious crypts they inhabit” (162-163). To Sword’s extensive catalogue I would add that Joseph Roach draws on cultural studies and performance theory to argue that circum-Atlantic culture re-creates itself in the face of death through the performance of substitution by surrogation—an uncanny process which rarely, if ever, succeeds, for it continually resists the closure that dominant Western narratives of modernity attempt to impose through the attempts at forgetting and segregation of the dead and the living (*Cities of the Dead*, New York: Columbia UP, 1996).

not better, but more justly” (xviii). Thus, the hauntological is fundamentally rooted in a concern for ethics and justice and is tied to the recognition of, communication with, and overall relationality to ghosts. Indeed, Derrida insists on the “*non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*” as the foundation of the very possibility of ethics and justice:

no ethics, no politics ... seems possible and thinkable and *just* that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or for those others who are not yet *there*, presently living No justice ... seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility*, beyond all living present ... before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead. (*Specters* xix)

Hauntology involves an ethical imperative to offer “respect” and “*responsibility*” for “ghosts,” whom Derrida describes as all others who are not living at present, thus extending to both the past and the future. Hauntology does not involve a belief in ghosts, per se, but takes up the figure of the ghost with seriousness in order to convey the ethical imperative to look beyond the living present. Furthermore, Davis argues that hauntology, which advances the ghost as a deconstructive figure who also delivers an ethical injunction to responsibility for the Other, can be seen as part of a larger “ethical turn of deconstruction” that started to emerge in the 1980s (9). In Davis’ words, “[a]ttending to the ghost is an ethical injunction insofar as it occupies the place of the Levinasian Other: a wholly irrecoverable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving” (9).¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ It is important to note the similarities between the shared approaches of Levinas and Derrida; indeed, Derrida’s ethics build on Levinas’ thinking. Shepherd remarks on the similarities between Levinas’s and Derrida’s projects, particularly in their respective critiques of Western metaphysics, embrace of alterity, and turn to ethical encounter: “one can see a strong correlation between Derrida’s idea of *différance* and Levinas’ conception of a pre-ontological

I would add to Davis' argument that the ghost as "intrusion" also accords with Derrida's ethics of radical hospitality, which largely build on the ethics of the Levinasian Other.¹¹¹ In contrast to conventional notions of hospitality, Derrida's hospitality of visitation involves a radical openness and vulnerability to a stranger or uninvited guest who has not been expected or foreseen ("Hostipality" 361). While Derrida argues that the hospitality of visitation, or "unconditional hospitality" is never truly possible, at the same time it paradoxically serves as the foundation for all possibility of all conditional hospitality, insofar as it can exist in the world of concrete realities (qtd. in Shepherd 60). Derrida's ethics of hospitality is central to his thinking, for it is at one with his philosophy of deconstruction. According to Derrida, "[i]f every concept shelters or lets itself be sheltered by another concept, by an other than itself that is no longer even its other, then no concept remains in place any longer. ... Hospitality—this is a name or example of deconstruction. ... deconstruction is hospitality to the other, to the other than oneself" ("Hostipality" 364). Furthermore, as Shepherd observes, Derrida's ethics of hospitality dovetails with hauntology, for it "posits an unconditional hospitality of *visitation*, where the guest, appearing as a messianic ghost-like figure, comes to disrupt and disturb our prearranged and formalized practices" (58). The encounter with a ghost, as intrusive Other, who both delivers an ethical injunction and offers an *opening* into the strange, the unheard, and that which lies beyond the present, thus participates in an ethics of hospitality of visitation. To "learn to live

structure of alterity, beyond essence and being. Both philosophers seek to overcome what they perceive as the fundamental fault of Western philosophy—its tendency to reduce the Other to the 'Same'—by replacing ontological questions of being with an analysis of the ethical encounter, thus giving philosophical priority not to *essence* but to heterogeneity" (49).

¹¹¹ As Derrida remarks in "Hostipality," there is "no discontinuity between *Totality and Infinity*—which insisted on the welcome ... and upon the subject as *hôte*," but Derrida adds there there is a "change of accent," from Levinas' image of peaceful welcoming to "a more violent experience, the drama of relation to the other that ruptures, bursts in or breaks in ... in other words, of a goodness, a good violence of the Other that precedes welcoming" (364).

with ghosts,” with “respect” and “*responsibility*,” one is subjected to the ghost’s intrusive visitation. That is, one serves as host to specters, but on the specters’ terms.

Haunted Subjectivity

How does Robinson’s *On Ghosts* demonstrate a *poethics* that resonates with Derridean hauntology? To begin to address that question, I will first describe the formal qualities of the collection. *On Ghosts* covers much terrain and incorporates prose and poetry, memoir and philosophical meditation, and, as with *Counterpart*, extended intertextuality. In contrast to the fantastic subject matter of *On Ghosts*, the prose tends towards the understated and matter-of-fact, and much of the tone of the collection is somber and reflective. Poetry, short essays, and ekphrastic explanations of personal photographs—which are described as if the reader can see them, but are in fact not depicted—are interspersed among a series of numbered “Incidents,” which are frequently framed as the narrator’s autobiographical descriptions of encounters with ghosts. The understated tone, straightforward explication of subject matter, and first-person point of view is established in the opening “Explanatory Note,” a brief prose essay. In “Explanatory Note,” the narrator describes being haunted as a “neutral” and “in some sense ordinary” phenomenon of “becoming aware of the presence of presence” that allows for individuals or places to be “vulnerable to heightened perception” (3). The tonal matter-of-factness shifts the concept of haunting away from commonplace associations with sensationalism or horror and reintroduces it as a topic for sober reflection.

Robinson introduces subjectivity as a major theme to be explored through a reconsideration of haunting, and she advances the notion of subjectivity as shaped through encounters with alterity. Derrida’s hauntology and his ethics of hospitality can illuminate the ethical dimensions of Robinson’s exploration of subjectivity in *On Ghosts*. Beginning in

“Explanatory Note,” Robinson’s description of haunting resonates with Derrida’s radical hospitality of visitation, in which the subject is made vulnerable through the intrusion of the ghost as Other. The text compares haunting to an infestation: “the perceiver [who] encounters an oblique and dubious phenomenon ... is not privileged. Rather, the perceiver is prepared for the experience on the basis of his or her having, so to speak, been eaten by pests. The condition is one of eroded defenses, of vulnerability” (4). At one point, in a later prose passage of *On Ghosts*, Robinson deploys the metaphor of hospitality: “The site of haunting may resist that occupying force, may object to the insult on its integrity. The site objects to the insult on its greater hospitality” (52). In accordance with Derrida’s hauntology and ethics, Robinson’s ghost also intrudes upon the subject and enjoins him or her to participate in the hospitality of visitation. As both Derrida and Robinson observe, haunting as visitation upsets the usual conventions of hospitality. Robinson’s narrating “I” indeed resists the “occupying force” who has not been welcomed in her usual conventions of “greater hospitality.”

Furthermore, Derrida’s hauntology is tied to an exploration of “presence” and its impact on commonplace understandings of subjectivity. I suggest that Derrida’s approach resonates with Robinson’s deployment of the trope of haunting in *On Ghosts* as an exploration of the self and mystical experiences of presence or union that cannot be rationally explained. Davis explains Derrida’s position on presence and self-presence:

Derrida calls on us to attend to ghosts, to unlearn what we thought we knew for certain in order to learn what we still cannot formulate or imagine. This does not entail believing in ghosts in any straightforward sense, since the ghost is precisely that of which the existence consists in its not quite existing. The point is to explore the *presence* of what no longer exists or does not yet exist, in order to

understand and to experience how it dislocates the *self-presence* of the subject and its contingent realities. (19)

It is precisely the hauntological exploration of the “*presence* of what no longer exists or does not yet exist” in order to disturb “the *self-presence* of the subject” that is a dominant theme of *On Ghosts*, as explained in “Explanatory Note.” Like Derridean hauntology, Robinson asserts that haunting functions to both de-form and reveal conditions about the subject, for haunting is “more disclosive of conditions that locate themselves in specific sites or persons” than it is about the nature of phantoms in themselves (3):

The apparition is not the entity that haunts. What it is, instead, is more like metaphysical sandpaper. It debrides, taking away all the dead tissue, and some of the living tissue ... When the apparition has whittled down your resistance, then you are less of who you are than you used to be. This lessening is now the mode of the haunting. There’s now a little alleyway, between the self and the not-self, newly arrived, and this alley gives free passage to come-who-will, or what-will.

(5)

For both Robinson and Derrida, haunting is an experience that is at once both quotidian and revelatory. *On Ghosts*, while at times narrating disturbing experiences, defines haunting as a “metaphysical” transformation rather than a horrifying event. Haunting, then, may involve the uncanny, but it is not a state to be avoided; rather, it can be explored productively. The very process of haunting involves overcoming the subject’s defenses, for the ghost first “whittle[s] down your resistance,” or the mechanisms that one deploys in an effort to enclose and protect the self. An apparition that “debrides” or “lessen[s]” the self can involve ethical possibility for if, in Robinson’s words, “Presence, then, is a *way*” between the “self and the not-self,” haunting can

involve a possibly welcome diminution of the ego-centric/narcissistic subject and offer an opening towards alterity. Haunting, that is, the disruptive encounter with the presence of the non-living Other, can productively allow for the deformation of the subject by dislocating its sense of self-presence and wholeness. This deformation of the subject can offer possibility. Robinson's metaphor of the "little alleyway, between the self and the not-self" that "gives free passage" to the "come-who-will, or what-will"—that is, the strange, new, and unsettling—illustrates the idea Derrida's haunted subject, open(ed) to the alterity of the ghost. *On Ghosts* thus deploys the figure of a haunted subject who allows free passage to a ghostly Other who hovers between absence and presence, existence and non-existence in order to explore poetic composition, textuality and lyric subjectivity. Finally, Derridean hauntology can be applied to *On Ghosts*, for Robinson's collection is a re-thinking of ghosts which acknowledges, as Frederic Jameson articulates in a commentary on *Specters of Marx*, "that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be," and the exploration of the "presences of presences" can reveal much about our world and our selves ("Marx's Purloined Letter," 39).

On Ghosts provides descriptive examples of "presences of presences," or the subject's encounter with a ghostly Other, in a numbered series of "Incidents" that appear throughout the collection. Some of the "Incidents" explicitly refer to death, including the description of Robinson's own experiences surrounding her grandmother's funeral and a vague reference to a child who ends his own life. However, the emphasis on haunting as ordinary becomes more pronounced as the "Incidents" progresses, with episodes from include the cliché to the mundane, as the narrating subject comments (50). For example, a ghost surfaces in unexplained and irksome, quotidian occurrences, such as when a video player's "tape clicks on mid-narrative when no one is there to push the PLAY button on" (14). Several of the later autobiographical

passages all involve sleep, or, more accurately, the narrator's experiences of liminal states between waking and sleep—a motif that gestures to the haunted subject as vulnerable, experiencing kind of subjective “lessening” or emptying that offers an opening for a ghostly Other to occupy. Two of the later “Incidents” describe a ghost as a disrupter of sleep, alternately a malicious stalker and/or an intrusive annoyance; as described in “Incident Three,” “another mark of the ghost,” whether “[a]bsent or present,” is to be “always incessant” (38). Other episodes describe haunting as vaguely involved in pleasurable memories, such as one of spending time with a presumably absent friend, and then going to a restful sleep. *On Ghosts* conveys haunting as experiences where the subject encounters a disruptive Other who is alternately “absent and present.” These hauntings permeate a large range of lived experiences: jarring and placid, traumatic and annoying, life-changing and ordinary.

Poetic Hauntings

An important dimension of *On Ghosts* further indicates that some instances of haunting involve the reading of literary texts and the ongoing development of a literary lineage, as much as they do any other kinds of lived experiences. This focus on literary lineage is also in accord with Derridean hauntology, which allows for literature to be read as hauntological—that is, both existing but not-existing. By extension, I argue, a hauntological view of the literary can illuminate how a writer can be both present and absent within a text, a theme that *On Ghosts* develops. Partially, this literary ghosting is a consequence of the citation style in *On Ghosts*. Whereas there was minimal bibliographical information cited in *Counterpart*, *On Ghosts* reduces citation even more. While some direct quotations include attributions to writers—these tend to be contemporary writers whose texts are cited once—many quotations are unattributed. Instead, on the copyright page of *On Ghosts*, Robinson includes a note that states “Unattributed quotes come

from Robin Blaser and Barbara Guest,” and so these writers—whom Robinson praises as highly influential in interviews, and whose work she cites in other writings as well—are themselves ghostly, both present throughout the text and, in their lack of attributed signature, absent. This move indicates the extent to which previous poets’ words can permeate a later poet’s thinking so much that there are no neatly demarcated boundaries between and across various writers’ texts.

Two passages in *On Ghosts* thematize the idea of poet as ghostly presence for the reader. In the passage “Incident Four,” the narrator describes the activity of reading poetry as a type of haunting imbued with the presence of the departed/departing poet. This haunting, through reading, is depicted as a significant event for the subject, just as the haunting by absent or departed loved ones and enemies in the other incidents. The text alludes to an unknown “she” who is a writer who hovers between life and death, unbeknownst to the narrator:

I felt then that I needed all her books. Immediately. By my side.

I brought them into bed with me. We lay there warm and at ease together. I was suffused with pleasure [...] keen contentment. [...]

Perhaps the most unearthly of experiences is to feel so thoroughly at ease, so full with trust that, for once, the body is not a boundary that hems one in. (45)

Although the text does not name the writer whose books the narrator contentedly falls asleep reading, it would appear to be Barbara Guest, who died in 2006. Robinson describes falling asleep to a book open to a page that begins with the words, “The Beautiful Voyage,” which is the title of a poem that appears in Guest’s 2003 collection, *Forces of Imagination: Writing on*

Writing.¹¹² “Incident Four” thus describes the writer, Guest, as a ghost: through her books, she is both absent and present to the reader. The narrator is “alone,” but feels a kind of togetherness with Guest’s words. In an eerie coincidence, the narrator is depicted as somehow needing the presence of Guest’s words at the time of Guest’s earthly departure. The reading experience is conveyed as “unearthly,” at once intensely embodied—the description emphasizes feelings of physical warmth, pleasure, and ease, while the narrator lies in bed—and transcending the bodily, for the narrator feels that “the body is not a boundary that hems one in.” This description of reading poetry as an “unearthly” experience conveys a positive experience of haunting, one in which the haunted subject is “lessened” through her encounter with the writer in an affirmative sense. In “Incident Four,” the passageway opened between the “self and not-self” ushers in an experience of pleasure and momentary union between the presence of the poet and reader, as felt by the reader.

At the same time, *On Ghosts* does not depict all encounters with reading and ghostly poets as cozy or potentially transcendent; it also offers a poetic haunting in which the reader feels awkward and embarrassed. Another prose section, “Visitor,” depicts a writer as a “dead man” who is visiting a class the narrator is teaching in order to read some of his poems. The text repeats, several times, that the “dead man” does not remember the narrator, and repeatedly asks “his companion” who she is and “what [her] role is,” resulting in the narrator’s embarrassment in front of her students “because it was I who had invited him to come” (33). Rather than depicting a scene where the narrator is “suffused with pleasure,” this encounter between reader and writer is awkward in its asymmetry, for the ghost of the writer does not recognize the reader. The narrator, as reader, had presumed an intimacy with the writer of which he is completely ignorant.

¹¹² Notably, *On Ghosts* is formally similar to Guest’s *Forces of Imagination*, which alternates between short essays and formally experimental poems.

Rather than addressing the reader, he instead speaks to “his companion,” who is also unnamed, and who has to translate the dead man’s words to the narrating “I.” Furthermore, the narrating reader had rested her authority as a teacher on the basis of this false intimacy, which the writer repeatedly belies. While the narrator and the students feel awkward, the visit is not a complete disaster, for “the dead man read his poems with vigor and elegance” (33). In “Visitor,” reading poetry does not produce transcendence or contented communion with the dead author, but, rather, profound ambivalence. The narrator is haunted by this encounter because she realizes that she carries false presumptions about the poet, a realization all the more uncomfortable as it occurs in the public forum of the classroom.

While the “dead man” in “Visitor” is not named, the narration of this episode includes a quote by the dead man with an excerpt of text written by Robin Blaser. While the quote is from a critical essay of Blaser’s on the modernist poet Mary Butts,¹¹³ Robinson’s text presents it in staggered lineation so that it looks, formally, like innovative poetry:

“where he found the ghosts and so settled on the word and a newly posed
language ... [so] it is, I assume,

with one writer after another

that the loosened, embattled relation to meaning [...]

turns up the ghosts—” (34)

¹¹³ The original quotation can be found in Robin Blaser’s essay, “Here Lies the Woodpecker Who was Zeus” in *A Sacred Quest: The Life and Writings of Mary Butts*. Ed. Christopher Wagstaff. Kingston, NY: McPherson, 1995. 159-223.

This quotation by Blaser foregrounds the idea of a writer's literary lineage as an ongoing process of "turn[ing] up the ghosts." A writer—who is necessarily a reader of other writer's texts—involves being haunted by previous writers, who are simultaneously absent and present. Indeed, like "Incident Four," which alludes to Guest as both absent and present, somewhere between dead and alive, so is Blaser, as explained on the subsequent page: "the subject was not yet entirely dead, and therefore his status as a ghost is debatable" (35). This quotation is ambiguous, as Blaser died in 2009, and *On Ghosts* is published in 2013. Might the description of the "dead man" be based on an autobiographical experience of Robinson teaching Blaser's poetry while he was still alive? Or does it point to Blaser, who, although deceased by 2013, can still be classified as "not yet entirely dead" because of his ongoing presence in texts?

On Ghosts leaves this ambiguity unresolved, just as it illustrates the relationship between a writer (as reader) and previous writers as having the potential for a great variety of possibilities. There may be authorial hauntings that are filled with ease, pleasure, and even the possibility of momentary transcendence, but there is not necessarily an easy rapport between writer and reader. Just as *On Ghosts* portrays haunting as akin to many types of dynamic relations there can be between people—fraught, easy, difficult, awkward, annoying—so these varying types of relations can exist between a writer and previous writers. What is inevitable is that, in the process of writing, a writer necessarily "turns up the ghosts." I argue that, despite the awkwardness and disappointment recounted in "Visitor," *On Ghosts* presents a writer as haunted by a literary lineage in terms that are ultimately productive, for having "found the ghosts," a writer can still "settle on the word and a newly posed language." The ghostly presences of Guest and Blaser that permeate *On Ghosts* indicate the alternating modes of embracing and stumbling

with literary influences, approaches that may be, at times, bursting with ease, pleasure, and inspiration, and at other times, full of discomforts and challenges.

Voice in Lyric Poetry

Thus far, I have focused largely on Robinson's conceptualization of subjectivity and its relation to alterity, including otherness as encountered through poetic texts. A further consideration of lyric subjectivity and textuality is the concept of "voice," which has also been a subject of critique in poststructuralist and Language writing accounts of lyric poetry, as, for example, in the rejection of the "voice poem" in Language writing. At the beginning of this chapter, I mention the postlanguage position on lyric subjectivity and voice, as articulated by Willis and cited by Robinson, "that ideas of self or voice are never entirely absent from the tonal shadings of language" ("Music Becomes Story 114). Before turning to the next poem, "Translation," it will be helpful to establish in greater detail how the concept of "voice" has been theorized in the discourse surrounding lyric poetry, including poststructuralist objections to conventional ideas about "voice."

Traditionally, "poetry is regularly imagined to be the privileged site of vocal presence," a concept that relies on the notion of poetic texts as secondary vehicles that derive from the primacy of oral speech (Richards n.p.). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida takes issue with this convention and what he considers the tyranny of voice. He claims that the oppressive metaphysical tradition of logocentrism "is also a phonocentrism," that posits an "absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being" (12); in other words, conventional understanding locates self-presence, being, and meaning within the "voice." Within a logocentric/phonocentric Western metaphysical tradition, the voice is privileged, as it "has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind. ... It signifies 'mental

experiences' which themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance" (11). Derrida both demonstrates the fallacy of equating "voice" with the being and presence of the speaker and demonstrates how much Western thought and language invest in these metaphysical assumptions.¹¹⁴

While Derrida's critique of voice as absolute presence is necessary to understand, contemporary poet-critic Susan Stewart has theorized lyric voice in terms that can even more fully elucidate Robinson's position on lyric voice. As Stewart observes, the concept of "voice" has persisted in a valued position for many who write and teach American lyric poetry, although at times in ways that may be problematic. According to Stewart, creative workshop clichés draw on the notion of "the poet finding his or her own voice" but such banalities "substitute a reifying and mystifying version of subjectivity for what is in fact most profound and engaging about poetic voice—that is, the plays of transformation it evokes beyond the irreducibility of its own grain" (110).

Stewart's concept of voice both revises the commonplace concept of voice as one's "own" possession that simultaneously stands in for a simplistic and reified concept of subjectivity, while at the same time honoring the love a human voice can inspire:

The "object" of my love for your voice emerges in the relation between my history and the uniqueness of your existence, the particular timbre, tone, hesitations, and features of articulation by which all the voices subject to your own history have shaped your voice's instrument. In listening, I am listening to

¹¹⁴ Fellow deconstructionist literary critic Paul de Man extends Derrida's critique. In his essay "Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric" (1984), de Man condemns "what we call the lyric, the instance of represented voice" as a term of "resistance and nostalgia, at the furthest remove from the materiality of actual history" (261, 262). As Richards summarizes, de Man condemns the tendency to read voice into lyric as delusional and warns, "lyric reading practices that hear voices where there are only words anthropomorphize at their own peril ..." (n.p.). Thus, de Man aims to strip textuality of any notion of "voice." I find that de Man's skepticism and dismissal of a simple notion of lyric voice is not applicable to Robinson, for she is interested in retaining and revising the concept of lyric voice.

the material history of your connection to all the dead and the living who have been impressed upon you. The voice ... holds within itself the life of the self—it cannot be another's. (112)

Stewart acknowledges that voice, while partaking in a speaker's unique features, is nevertheless plural, for it is imprinted by the other voices that have gone before. Indeed, Stewart's reading is compatible with Derridean deconstruction insofar as she notes that all language carries the citation of previous language; there is no original "voice." Moreover, Stewart observes that voice is not coincident with the presence and/or being of the speaker, for voice is necessarily compound, emerging through a relation between reader and poet and their unique histories. In describing the reader's encounter with a poet's voice in the poem, Stewart cites Friedrich Schiller to explain how the reader leaves his or her own ego to meet with the poet's words; consequently, the poet's voice is necessarily multiple:

"Everyday language has for this condition of absence-of-self under the domination of sense-perception the very appropriate expression *to be beside oneself*—that is, to be outside one's ego." Standing behind, standing before, standing beside—all send the voice into a difficult trajectory; it is the trajectory of writer and reader who can only project and approximate one another's presence, and it is the trajectory of generations, of the many-branched temporal path between the dead and the living. (113)

Stewart carefully avoids the trap of logocentrism, for she acknowledges that the poet and reader can only "project and approximate one another's presence," rather than access presence directly. Compellingly, in a move that is compatible with Derridean hauntology, Stewart emphasizes how the ongoing creation of voices through poetry connects the dead and living.

Furthermore, Stewart argues that her understanding of voice takes on a spiritual dimension by turning to the Platonic character of Diotima for an analogy: “[t]he individual voice is ... demonic, mediating, traversing in Diotima’s sense of the (*daimon*) of love in her discourse to Socrates in the *Symposium*” (112). Furthermore, Stewart claims, “[a]s the *daimon* of the *Symposium* bore messages by means of incantation and prophecy through the space between gods and men, the voice as sound is resolved in the meeting between persons that moves or touches those who are in its presence—those touched” (113-114). Stewart’s comparison of voice to Diotima’s *daimon*, a mediating spirit that uses the “voice” that emerges through poetry, is a pagan spiritual symbol akin to Derrida’s ghosts. In contrast to a reference to the Judeo-Christian God, which may be read as invested in hierarchical relations in a circumscribed religious context, the figure of the *daimon* bespeaks a spiritual, but not specific or dogmatic, dimension of literary experience. Stewart’s analogy to the *daimon* highlights how poetic voice can serve as an intermediary vehicle that can traverse space and time and can partake of both immanent and transcendent realms.

I quote Stewart at length because she articulates a valuable understanding of lyric voice with attributes that surface in Robinson’s poem, “Translation” (as well as another poem I turn to at the end of the chapter, “Speak”). Robinson’s poetry characterizes lyric voice with the following features: lyric voice is set on a trajectory that is shaped by, on one level, the meeting of the poet and reader in the poem; voice is therefore necessarily compound/plural; voice traverses the temporal realms of the living and the dead; and the concept of voice partakes in a strong spiritual or mystical dimension.

The Ghosts of Lyric: Translation, Composition, Self and Voice

One of the poems in *On Ghosts*, “Translation,” uses the figure of the ghost/spirit to explore poetic language, translation as a key element of the process of lyric composition, and the complex configuration of the lyric self and lyric voice. “Translation” opens with a quote from contemporary American poet James Longley on the topic of poetic texts and translations, which he describes, metaphorically, as ghosts.

... Everything you see on the page is a ghost [...] Then the translations are
ghosts of ghosts, and the voice I give them is at best a mockery of their past life.
I fear I cannot walk this terrain without falling into chasms of self: self-interest,
self-pity. How will I be sure that the spirit is speaking in me at all, much less when
I transcribe, much less when I translate? –James Longley

In “Translation,” Robinson pointedly varies the typography, Longley’s quotation is in typewriter-style font, which foregrounds the writing process as a physical activity in which the writer creates the text on the page through the manual manipulation of a machine. Rather than effacing the embodied writing process through the use of consistent fonts that are naturalized in contemporary word-processing conventions, the typescript font also showcases text as rough draft, underscoring writing and translating as a process that, in “Translation,” is characterized as vexed.

In the passage, Longley describes texts, or “[e]verything you see on the page,” as the ghost of the corporeal and translations as “ghosts of ghosts.” This idea of translation, the process of changing words from one language to another, as turning up ghosts can be read in hauntological terms, for Derrida also theorizes the ghostliness of the translation process as words differ across texts. In Derrida’s words, “[a] masterpiece always moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost. ... In their plurality, the words of translation ... disorganize themselves as

well through the very effect of the specter” (*Specters* 18). The consideration of translation as ghostly highlights the impossibility of an exact replication of a text’s original words. Like the ghost, a translation always involves differences, approximations, and gaps in meaning; at the same time, these gaps allow an opening onto possibilities. This hauntological reading of translation recalls Robinson’s poem “Doppelgänger” in *Counterpart*, which posed translation—a double in language that is necessarily an inexact counterpart—as a way to “cure the echo,” or the exact replication of speech/text/source/speaking subject, and its attending, destructive narcissism. While “Doppelgänger” showcases translation as the best, or perhaps only alternative to replication of the same, the Longley’s opening quotation in “Translation” emphasizes how fraught the process of translating can be, as translations that are “ghosts as ghosts” can, in their shifting ethereality, fail to honor the “spirit” of the previous text.

After Longley’s quotation, the following verse section expands upon Longley’s anxious question, “[h]ow will I be sure that the spirit is speaking in me at all ...?”:

Doggerel Ghost can speak in tongues.

From the wetness of spirit he twists and is wrung.

Thirsty language wants to sip from this vessel

But the language of Ghost never sates, only wrestles. (31)

In the verse section, Robinson parodically uses the form of doggerel in verse centered on the figure of “Doggerel Ghost.” Doggerel is usually a pejorative term in poetry scholarship, commonly referring to “Rough, poorly constructed verse, characterized by either (1) extreme metrical irregularity or (2) easy rhyme and monotonous rhythm, cheap sentiment, and triviality” (Palache, n.p.). The verse section of “Translation,” with its often simplistically rhymed couplets (well/shell; up/cup) and metrical irregularity, fulfills the definition of doggerel. In terms of

meter, the line length varies widely, and the longer lines sound awkwardly extended, unable to be contained in the established meter. This metrical excess enacts what the content describes, which is a broken cup, a “vessel” that “*language wants to sip from,*” but this container leaks its surplus content. Similarly, the doggerel form cannot contain the “ghost,” which is figured as a broken and leaking vessel elsewhere in *On Ghosts* as well.¹¹⁵ The use of the choppy verse form also enacts the coarseness of the translation/writing process from text to text or ghost/spirit to word by demonstrating how writing/translation is a rough process that “*never sates, only wrestles,*” which echoes Langley’s earnest description of the wrestling between the translator and texts. The doggerel verse in “Translation” so markedly contrasts Robinson’s more typical formal commitments that it can be read as intentional parody. It pointedly, if momentarily, shifts the tone of *On Ghosts*, from one that is reflective and at times unsettling, to one that is comically absurd, rather pathetic, and therefore all too human. Writers/translators of words/spirit try, bungle, get tongue-tied, are imperfect, broken, leaky, and generally inelegant—but they nevertheless continue to try.

In addition to a consideration of “translation” as the transformation of words of speech or text between two languages, the term “translation” can also have a broader meaning, as the process of change of something from one form to another. In “Translation,” Robinson gestures towards the transformational process from spirit/ghost to text through speech. Specifically, lyrical composition can be considered “translation” wherein the poet encounters a spirit or ghost, whose message the poet translates by speaking in tongues. Indeed, the activity of speaking in

¹¹⁵ In one episode from *On Ghosts*, “On the Relation of Mother and Child to Haunting and Ghost,” the text states, “it is in the nature of ghosts to be broken” and continues in the narratorial voice: “In what way is a ghost broken, and if it were a crushed teacup, glued painstakingly back together, what would emerge? Most likely it would be only a teacup. A receptacle, or a disguised, but in either case no longer watertight” (16). Additionally, the image of the leaky cup is mentioned in the brief essay, “Skepticism,” on the subject of Robinson’s doubt about whether her recently deceased grandmother haunted her: “While the doubting of doubt might be at the heart of bereavement, the ugly gap where the ghost gets in, gets in with his or her serum of doubt, which doubtless overflows its leaky cup” (27).

tongues is referenced in the doggerel verse section, with the lines, “*So the student of tongues becomes a ghost / and the betrayer of saying his impeccable host*” (32). Speaking in tongues is also referenced in the concluding prose quotation of “Translation”:

He says,

“The God with whom I was partnered in my time learning to speak in tongues is no longer in/with/above me. Even when He was, the question of who was speaking was difficult.” (32)

What links does the poem draw among translation, poetic composition, and speaking in tongues?

The origin of the idea of speaking in tongues is described in the New Testament as a gift of the Holy Spirit that descends upon Christ’s followers on the festival of the Pentecost. The apostles with the gift of tongues were suddenly given able to speak in foreign languages so that others in the crowd, from various nations, could understand them (Acts 2:1-11). Certain charismatic Protestant traditions, particularly Pentecostalism, incorporate the practice of speaking in tongues into their religious worship. Speaking in tongues, also called glossolalia, involves the production of verbal speech that is generally unintelligible to both speaker and listeners (Williams 249). In the practice of glossolalia, a type of “translation” occurs: “While glossolalia is lexically noncommunicative, in Christian groups the meaning is conveyed to the group by an interpreter whose ability to ‘translate’ is [also] considered to be ... one of the vocal gifts of the Spirit. The ‘translation’ ... is not to be regarded as a word by word ‘translation.’ It would seem rather that the interpreter ... conveys the mood or the inner mental processes of the speaker” (Williams 249). Robinson’s references to speaking in tongues gesture to glossolalia as a metaphor for lyric composition as the translation of “spirit” into text, and also lend a spiritual dimension to the exploration of lyric composition/translation. With this metaphor to glossolalia,

poetic language can thus be compared to mystical utterance. While the reference to speaking in tongues takes on a particularly Christian overtone, it is notable that the “God with whom I am partnered” is an ambiguous figure. As such, I suggest that the spirit/Ghost/God invoked in “Translation” is still compatible with both the Ghost of Derrida’s hauntology and Stewart’s mediating *daimon*.

While “Translation” invokes glossolalia, the text does not resolve in a tidy metaphor, but instead indicates the mystery inherent in the processes of ghostly poetic composition/translation and gestures to the indeterminable source of lyric voice in any poem. Longley’s question “How will I be sure that the spirit is speaking in me at all, much less when I transcribe, much less when I translate?” conveys how spiritual translation as textual composition differs from charismatic Christian practice, in which the gift of speaking in tongues and the gift of interpreting tongues is separated out into two individuals. For Longley, the writer is interpreter/translator, but the “speaker” as ghost indicates a figure that is both separate from and therefore exterior to the writer, while at the same time interior. On one level, “the spirit” is the one who speaks, but, since the spirit (ideally) speaks “in me,” then the writer is the “speaker” as well. This confusion over who is speaking, and whether that voice is internal or external, is explicitly commented on in the poem’s concluding quotation, which is attributed only to unnamed “He,” a “*student of tongues*,” who becomes a narrating “I.”¹¹⁶ This student of tongues acknowledges that “the question of who was speaking was difficult,” while at the same time mourning a lost God who had previously “partnered” with him and is now absent. Ultimately, in “Translation,” the question of who is speaking in a poetic text is fundamentally ambiguous.

¹¹⁶ While I have been unable to locate the source of this quote, the process of deduction leads me to conclude that “He” would be Blaser.

In her critical writing, Robinson states this position directly, indicating that the question of mystical “presence” and its relation to the lyric subject and/or composing poet, is unresolved and unresolvable: “what is the source of poetry and how does it find voice? . . . let me acknowledge that the issues of ‘source’ can’t be resolved” (“Persona” 92). This statement on the obscurity of the “source” of poetry and lyric voice perhaps helps the reader understand the necessary confusion of who is the ghost in the text “Translation.” Not only are both the writing subject and the spirit/ghost who is “speaking” within the writing subject alternately present and absent, but “Translation” also deliberately obscures who haunts whom, for the “ghost” stands in for many elements—the text printed on the page, translations, the spirit that inspires, and the student of tongues, who is also the poet. As Robinson states in a later poem in *On Ghosts*, “Nursery Rhyme,” “The ghost by nature is confusion” (37). Rather constructing a fixed analogy, “Translation” develops a cluster of slippery and shifting ghosts that indicate the unknowability of the exact mechanisms of poetic composition as translation from spirit to language.

At the same time, the shifting ghosts in “Translation” are used to investigate the issue of the presence of self and voice in lyric composition. At first it seems that ghost/spirit/Holy Spirit/God is the poetic “speaker,” as in the lines “*Doggerel Ghost can speak in tongues*” and “*the Ghost sings from a code: / irritant, error, self-song, and ode*,” in which case the poet might be only the interpreter who translates what the ghost/spirit says. This division of compositional labor might seem to hearken back to the ancient tradition of a divine muse who sings and thus inspires the poet to compose. At the same time, the metaphor of the poet as interpreter also upends the contemporary lyric convention where the lyric “I” is the “speaker” who articulates the poet’s voice/presence directly. Is it then replaced with the postmodern idea of the “scriptor,” that

Roland Barthes describes, a kind of passive conduit that enables readers to be the active interpreters?

I argue that “Translation” does not rest with the a simple description of the poet as divinely inspired by a ghost/spirit/muse, nor with a stable lyric “I” whose presence is configured within the poem, nor a poet as passive scriptor. In the Longley quotation, the narrator observes that, in his unsteady attempt to approximate the spirit of a text written by another, there is nevertheless a turn towards the self, for he wrestles with “chasms of self” all the more as they surface through “self-interest, self-pity.” Thus the process of translation involves both the encounter with otherness *and* self-encounter. In the doggerel verse that follows, these “chasms of self” that the writer/translator falls into are echoed in the first line of the verse section, “*Self and voice fell down the well / excavating its watery shell.*” Furthermore, the Ghost who “sings from a code” includes in his repertoire “*irritant, error, self-song, and ode,*” which alludes to other forms of lyrical production in addition to doggerel, including both the formal, serious, and complex lyric verse of the “*ode*” and the expressive, introspective lyric form of “*self-song.*” The types of lyrics that the Ghost sings are opaque, as they are from a “code,” and therefore far from direct or transparent transmission of language; translation is needed to decipher any lyrical code. Furthermore, the references to “*self*” and “*voice*” highlight that, in Willis’s terms, shadings of the lyric subject and lyric voice are both ever-present, but they are also essentially unstable; the fall into a well unearths a “watery shell,” a paradoxical object that, like the Doggerel Ghost’s offer of a “broken cup,” is a vessel that both contains and overflows its contents. Doggerel Ghost hauls up “*Self and voice*” but offers only language that “*never sates, only wrestles.*” Thus, Robinson identifies the ghostly presences of self and voice that always surface within lyric composition

indirectly, only as “ghosts of ghosts” or translations that must always exceed the vessel of language that seeks to contain them.

Furthermore, the figures of ghosts in “Translation” that shift from the speaker/speaker of tongues to poet/student of tongues disrupt the neat boundary between interiority and exteriority. This crossing of interiority and exteriority shows lyric voice—as in Stewart’s formulation—to be compound, intermediary, and participating in a spiritual dimension that links reader and poet, the living and the departed. In her critical writing, Robinson similarly asserts that lyric composition can be viewed as akin to spiritual or mystical experience: “[i]n poetry and mystical utterance, there is no necessary disagreement between the simultaneity of the speaker’s voice and the voice that arrives from outside” (“Persona” 94). This is a configuration of lyric voice that crosses the boundaries between the lyric subject’s interiority and exteriority as well as the borders between the immanence of the living world and the spiritual realm of ghosts/the dead. This boundary-crossing lyric voice therefore challenges both the conventional notion of a poet “finding” her singular voice and the avant-garde opposition to the “voice poem” (or “*self-song*”), for it dismantles the idea of lyric voice as straightforward self-expression from a pure interiority.

Robinson’s notion of ghostly translation that draws on the metaphor of glossolalia allows a hauntological reading. “Translation” describes not an attempt of language to copy an original, centered presence, but rather explores how difference is introduced through translation of language and the processes of writing composition. The figure of the ghost highlights the interplay between the absence and the presence of the ghost/spirit. Indeed, “Translation” also accords with Derridean hauntology insofar as ethical questions surface within the text. As the figure of the ghost becomes more complex through the description of the production of multiple types of lyric poetry, the poet or “student of tongues” becomes a “ghost” and “betrayal of saying

his impeccable host.” The poet’s betrayal of the “host” indicates that the poet as translator may be seen as a guest to spirit/previous texts, but may also be seen as a parasite, as indicated by Langley’s reference to the “mockery of their past life” inherent in the process of translation. As translation is always leaking, seeping, or otherwise producing excess in its rough approximation of previous text(s), so does lyric poetry run the risk of betraying the ghost or spirit which hosts or visit.

The issue of betrayal—the opposite of hospitality—foregrounds the ethical quandary of lyric composition that Longley considers so anxiously: given that exact replication is not possible, how to speak for the spirit or ghost who speaks in me? In hauntological terms, how can one respect the ghost—the alterity and singularity of the Other—in the conversation and companionship that Derrida insists is required? To say anything is to risk the “*error*” that is mentioned in the doggerel verse, but silence does not honor the ghost either. On the other hand, the term “*error*” brings up associations with its etymologically linked term “*errant*,” or wandering, a concept often embraced in contemporary poetry, as discussed in the earlier chapter on Howe, as well as theorized in the relational poetics of Edouard Glissant. In such a view, wandering is embraced as the process of experiencing the world and developing relations to develop self-exploration and poetics that is inherently relational; as Glissant argues, “the tale of errantry is the tale of Relation” (18). Furthermore, Glissant espouses a nomadism that is inherently multilingual, opposed the “totalitarianism of any monolingual intent” (19). In such a view, the errantry—or error—of translation is necessary to navigate as a nomad among various languages and experiences. In hauntological terms, in order to avoid betraying “the host,” the poet can move towards Derrida’s radical hospitality of visitation, which allows an opening for the presence of the ghost as visitor and involves the process of learning to speak to/for/about the

ghost. While perfect balance among spirit, poet, and texts may never be achieved, this might not be the ultimate goal. Translation/composition may always entail loss as previous language and/or mystical utterance is transcribed to a new text, but a writer can aim to honor the visiting spirit with responsibility as he or she wanders through the writing process.

Apostrophe, Lyric, and Textual Encounter

Thus far, I have described Robinson's textual encounters between writer and reader in ethical terms in two ways. First, I have referenced Robinson's extensive use of intertextuality, which presents writing as inherently citational. This strategy advances writing as an ethical, communal activity, for writers are always readers, and part of their responsibility is to respond to fellow writers' works. Second, I have considered the encounter between writer and reader in hauntological terms, in which the reading and translating of literature is haunted by the ghostly figure of the previous writer. While Robinson allows for encounters between reader and writer to carry a range of affective consequences for the reading subject, and visitation by a writer's literary forebears may be an activity that is uncomfortable or fraught—as described in “Visit” and “Translation” in *On Ghosts*—it nevertheless carries great value, as the literary is positioned as a potential opening to alterity, a passageway between the “self and non-self,” and therefore can enable ethical relations among writers. However, both of these interpretations allow for reading as the site of ethical possibilities insofar as they relate to the writing subject's ongoing engagement with a writer's literary lineage; in all of these instances, the reader is also a writer.

I turn now to investigate Robinson's broader treatment of textual encounter in writings that theorize, describe, or enact direct address wherein the writing subject, “I,” addresses an unknown reader who is not necessarily a writer. This turn to a consideration of Robinson's relation between an “I” and “you” follows the pattern of each of the chapters of this dissertation,

where I begin with a consideration of the postlanguage lyric poet's articulation of a lyric "I" and then examine how their writing theorizes and enacts an ethical engagement with the reader through an invoked or implied "you." While this shift in emphasis from the lyric "I" to the lyric "you" largely follows the progression of Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and could be traced more or less chronologically among certain selections of Howe's later poems, for Robinson, it necessitates a turn to an earlier collection of lyric poetry, *Apostrophe*, from 2006, where several selections consider encounter between writer and reader in order to investigate the ethics of lyric address.

Robinson frames *Apostrophe* with epigraphs that foreground the lyric as a site of potential encounter between reader and writer. I suggest that this opening framework sets up an exploration of lyric address in *Apostrophe* that partly coincides with a Levinasian-Celanian model of lyric reading as ethical encounter, and partly modifies this model with a Derridean emphasis on difference and distance between the lyric "you" and the lyric "I." The opening page of *Apostrophe* includes a quotation from the influential 1981 essay "Apostrophe" by Jonathan Culler, a deconstructionist literary critic. Robinson's text excerpt's Culler's discussion of Keats' eight-line poem "This Living Hand," wherein the lyric "I" directly addresses a "thou/you" in a most ghostly way, as the speaking subject indicates that, through the poem, he will posthumously "haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights" while holding out a hand "towards you":

The poem baldly asserts what is false: that a living hand, warm and capable, is being held toward us, that we can see it. The narrator contrasts his life with death, proleptically predicting that when he is dead the reader will seek to overcome his death, will blind himself to his death by an imaginative act. We fulfill this icy prediction...by losing our empirical lives: forgetting the temporality which

supports them and trying to embrace a purely fictional time in which we can believe that the hand is really present and perpetually held toward us through the poem. (7)¹¹⁷

Some background information is necessary to help understand Culler's argument. As a literary term, "apostrophe" can be somewhat slippery, as Waters observes:

Poetic address, especially to unhearing entities, whether these be abstractions, inanimate objects, animals, infants, or absent or dead people. ... Some poetry critics have treated the term apostrophe as interchangeable with the term address, so including poetic speech not only to unhearing entities but to the listening beloved, friend, or patron or to contemporary or later readers. ("Apostrophe" n.p.)¹¹⁸

Culler applies the term apostrophe interchangeably with lyric address, for his essay investigates examples of Romantic lyric poems that address unhearing entities and those that address readers.¹¹⁹ Robinson's text explores apostrophe in both meanings of the term as well; her citation of Culler in the epigraph to *Apostrophe* in fact focuses on Keats' notable poetic direct address to the reader.¹²⁰ The epigraph includes an excerpt of Culler's reading of Keats that invokes a

¹¹⁷ The entire text of Keats' poem "This Living Hand" is as follows:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is—
I hold it towards you. (*John Keats: The Complete Poems* 459)

¹¹⁸ The term "apostrophe" has roots in rhetoric. It derives from ancient Greek phrase "turning away," which refers to a gesture from classical oratory in which the speaker turns to address someone who cannot hear him.

¹¹⁹ Not all agree with Culler's treatment. Critic Douglas J. Kneale, for example, takes issue with Culler's conflation of the terms "apostrophe" and "address." See "Romantic Aversions; Apostrophe Reconsidered." *ELH* 58.1 (1991): 141-65.

¹²⁰ Much of Culler's essay takes up Romantic odes that use the vocative for unhearing entities, in particular, the use of "O" to hail inanimate objects and/or nature. Culler argues that the "O" is a rather embarrassing literary device in

disruption of commonplace understanding of temporality through the experience of reading apostrophic lyric poetry. The disrupted temporality that Culler describes is the poetic invocation of the construction and “embrace” of “a purely fictional time” that occurs with readers’ participation through the (temporary) loss of “our empirical lives.” As Culler observes, “This Living Hand” rests on a falsehood: Keats’ hand is dead, not living, and is not actually held out to the reader. Yet at the same time, the conceit is not entirely false’ the “icy prediction” that the reader can overcome the author’s death, as made in the address to the reader, is fulfilled through the “imaginative act” of reading the lyric poem.

The epigraph by Culler gestures to possibilities that emerge from experiences of ruptured temporality through lyric poetry. Culler argues that if one “distinguish two forces in poetry, the narrative and the apostrophic ... the lyric is characteristically the triumph of the apostrophic” (149). Culler’s opposition between the apostrophic and the narrative is essential to understand because of its implications for temporality: “[a]postrophe resists narrative because its *now* is not a moment in a temporal sequence but a *now* of discourse, of writing” (152). With apostrophe, lyric is freed from “our empirical lives”: “Apostrophe is not the representation of an event; if it works, it produces a fictive, discursive event” (153). As a result, Culler argues, in lyric poetry, apostrophe has the power to displace the necessity of irreversible loss within temporality. Consequently, presence and absence are no longer opposed; this is most clearly seen in the poetic form of the elegy, which simultaneously evokes life and death, absence and presence (151). “This Living Hand” can be read as an inverted elegy, in which the lyric “I” invokes not another’s death, but his own. Keats’ poem insists on his own continued presence by addressing—and therefore haunting—the reader. Thus, the lyric as apostrophic—which, if it is understood in a

which the lyric “I” self-consciously performs the self as a poetic visionary. However, the epigraph in Robinson’s collection *Apostrophe* does not take up Culler’s interpretation of apostrophe as an invocation of inanimate objects or unhearing persons. Instead, she focuses on his analysis of Keats’ direct address to the reader.

broader sense to encompass “address,” as Culler does—may “assert what is false,” in the sense that it is not rooted directly in what Culler calls “our empirical lives.” Despite the falsehood of lyric address, Culler’s argument underscores a major theme of Robinson’s that I have detailed in this chapter: lyric’s essential interplay between presence and absence. Furthermore, lyric’s simultaneous absence and presence, as facilitated through the “triumph of the apostrophic,” emphasizes lyric as rhetoric. Thus, Robinson’s citation of Culler corresponds with the critical notion, also articulated by Brewster, Waters, and Blasing, that lyric is a rhetorical genre, fundamentally concerned with the nature of address.

How does this epigraph by Culler characterize lyric address? The citation of Culler’s analysis of Keats’ “This Living Hand” foregrounds encounter between reader and writer, but not one that is facile or comforting, as it involves the lyric “I” reaching out with a spectral hand in a disturbing way. The hand, if it were in “the icy silence of the tomb,” would “[s]o haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights / That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood / So in my veins red life might stream again.” This encounter between writer and reader is far from one of easy harmony; to Robinson, haunting may be a “neutral” phenomenon, but Keats’s verse deploys vampiric metaphors. As I argued earlier, the encounter between reader and writer may, like any interpersonal relations, take on any of a range of affective possibilities. Furthermore, as with Keats’s poem, lyric encounter may differ from the more utopian overtones of the Levinasian-Celanian model of textual encounter. I suggest that several poems in *Apostrophe* allow for the possibility that lyric poetry may be a potential site of Levinasian-Celanian ethical encounter, but, at the same time, emphasize the continued possibility of difference, conflict, and dissonance rather than easy harmony.

“Gaps in the Span” and Rejected Gifts: The Problem of Connection

Several lyric poems in *Apostrophe*, including “The Nocturnal Bridge,” “Gift,” and “Speak,” resist the characterization of facile connection between self and Other, subject and object, writer and reader. On the contrary, the problematic nature of the connection between self and Other—along with the necessity of the attempt to connect—emerges within several poems of the collection, starting with the opening poem of the collection, “The Nocturnal Bridge.” The text begins with images of gaps that occur within linkages. The setting is, mysteriously, “Under the field”:

its flowing substance,

are gaps in the span—

who parts

but lovers,

self from beloved self. (8)

The supposedly solid terrain of the field is revealed to have, underneath it, water, a “flowing substance,” constantly in motion. The titular bridge is initially referred to indirectly, not for its function of providing connection, but for where it is discontinuous: the “gaps in the span” refers to the “span” of a bridge that is the extent between the bridge supports. “Span” can also refer to limited amounts of space or time, and thus further highlights discontinuity, as does the image of the separation of the bodies of lovers: “who parts / but lovers, / self from beloved self.” Instead of the imagery of erotic connection, the lovers divide, their selves individuate; their span of time together appears to be ending. Later in the poem, while connection beckons with the phrase “the

bridge / urging / to its trespass,” consummation may be either deferred or already concluded, for we are left with an image of a lover’s departure as it recedes into darkness: “The beloved body interred / in the free black air” (9). The image is paradoxical: the solidity of the body is “interred” not in earth, but in the insubstantial darkness of the atmosphere. “The beloved body” is untethered, disappearing into the obscurity of night, and thereby delivering not desired connection but the dark freedom that comes with parting.

The second poem of *Apostrophe*, “Gift,” further describes a failed attempt at connection, specifically, a thwarted attempt at gift giving. It begins with an image of giving as an activity circumscribed by the giver:

You are to be wrapped securely,
to rest now, proffered.
The cover soothes itself
As it falls across your profile. (11)

The poem’s opening word, “You,” highlights this poem as boldly apostrophic in its address to an inanimate object, the gift, although the indication to “your profile” may imply a double meaning, for the “you” may refer to a human addressee as well. The speaker/giver opens by attempting to impose her will on the gift; she intends for the gift to be enclosed by being “wrapped securely,” “to rest,” to be soothed by the cover that “falls across your profile.” Formally, the opening lines enact this will to closure: aligned on the right margin, they comprise one imperative and one declarative sentence, both closed with definitive periods at the ends of lines two and four. However, the strong imperative and the mention of a “cover” that insists that it is soothing, but may be smothering, the “profile” of the potentially human addressee, delivers an image that is more disturbing than calming.

The scene shifts with the following lines, “But the dream hand lifts ahead of you, / casting and castigating” (11). The speaker’s will to secure and enclose the gift through smooth wrapping is undermined with the line “But the dream hand lifts ahead of you,” a dramatic reversal of the opening lines that is formally situated on the opposing, left margin. The image of the hand recalls Keats’ “living hand” that is, in Culler’s words, “really present and perpetually held toward us through the poem.” But Robinson inverts this image; this is a “dream hand,” not a “living hand.” While Robinson’s wording relegates the ontological status of the hand to a dream state, it does not make this image of the hand any less present or forceful. Instead, the “dream hand” interrupts the intended gift-giving ritual: any idealized or even everyday image of hands welcoming one another through the harmonious offer and reception of a gift is disrupted, as the “dream hand” is instead “casting and castigating.” This phrase brings to mind references to a hand discarding, throwing, scolding, criticizing, or punishing, with such harsh actions underscored by the hissing repetition of the words “casting,” “castigating,” and a few lines later, the imperative “Cast,” which is directed towards the gift as “plaything”:

plaything, this is
weary’s bauble
all undone:
stirring inside
in the trinket’s clutch. (11)

The longed-for security of the opening lines is unsettled, as we are in the “midst of no sure thing.” While the diction of the concluding stanza downplays the seriousness of gift, which is now likened to a “plaything,” “weary’s bauble” and “a trinket’s clutch,” the speaker’s discord and disappointment is evident. As opposed to the intention of the opening line, the gift’s

reception cannot be secured. The line “weary’s bauble / all undone” points to an unraveling in contrast to the soothed security of the opening; “stirring inside / the trinket’s clutch” gestures to movement and the alterity that the giver/speaker cannot control, despite her attempt to “clutch” the gift.

“Gift” can be read as a meditation on the fraught nature of gift-giving as a means of connection between subject and Other. I suggest that it can be productive to read it through the lens of Derridean ethics. Derrida explores the concept of the gift in the book *Given Time I. Counterfeit Money*. In opposition to the anthropological explanation of the gift as grounded in circles of economy and governed by ties of obligation and expectations of reciprocity, Derrida describes the gift as running towards “the measureless and the excessive” (*Given Time* 7, 91): “[t]he gift, if there is any, will always be *without* border. ... The gift that does not run over its borders, a gift that would let itself be contained in a determination and limited by the indivisibility of an identifiable *trait* would not be a gift. As soon as it delimits itself, a gift is prey to calculation and measure” (*Given Time* 91). A gift given in the expectation of reciprocity or other economic exchange is not truly a gift, for the giver controls the terms of the exchange. Robinson’s poem “Gift” illustrates the inherently *excessive* and unstable nature of gift-giving in a Derridean fashion, for there is movement and instability beyond the flattened borders of the wrapped present. The speaker/giver’s attempt at control of the gift is also an attempted control of the recipient; the resulting “midst of no sure thing” results from the sequence of gift prepared, proffered, and rebuked. This series indicates that the interchange between giver, recipient, and gift—at least, as the gift as intended to be circumscribed or controlled by the giver/writer—has become “all undone.” The conclusion of “Gift” demonstrates how gift-giving is, in Derrida’s words, “Not impossible but *the* impossible” (*Given Time* 7).

What are the implications of the undoing of the gift-giving exchange in Robinson's poem? Is gift-giving merely a cul-de-sac, one that we should avoid entering? Reading "Gift" in terms of Derridean ethics, the answer is no. As Shepherd explains, for Derrida, "the *impossibility* of a pure gift, [like] an unconditional hospitality of visitation, rather than leading to paralysis or inaction, is the very dynamic which empowers ethical action, the practicing of hospitality" (64). Furthermore, Shakespeare observes that, for Derrida, a pure gift—"one untainted by the economy of exchange, reward, gratitude or self-congratulation" is paradoxically impossible and nevertheless imperative, for it "leaves its mark in experience" as trace or ashes within actual exchange (Shakespeare 149, 162). Therefore, the answer is not to abandon gift giving, but to adjust, as much as possible, the gift-giver's approach. The giver should minimize expectation, demand, or constraints in return from the Other. The giver/speaker of "Gift" clearly seeks to control the terms of giving, thus contributing to the catastrophic failure of reception. The invocation of the "dream hand" that is "casting and castigating" highlights a recurrent theme of the extension of the subject towards the other that also appears in "Nocturnal Bridge": connection is desired, but conflict and division surfaces. The gap between the self and other cannot be completely bridged.

In addition to its illustration of the Derridean quandary of gift-giving as an impossible imperative, "Gift" concerns language as an exploration of encounter between writer and reader within the lyric. Again, a Derridean reading is possible: the speaker/giver has a certain intention for the gift, just as a writer has a certain intention for a text, but that does not mean the gift will remain securely enclosed within the writer's intentions. In the process of reception by the reader, there may be a "stirring inside" the text, an undoing of the original intentions. Thus, in "Gift," Robinson modifies the Levinasian-Celanian model of lyric as textual encounter through the

recognition that there is always the possibility of conflict: the writer can be too rigid in her insistence on intended meaning, or the reader can rebuke or discard the gift/text. Indeed, the “castigating” “dream hand” in “Gift” inverts Paul Celan’s comparisons of a poem to a handshake and poems as “gifts to the attentive. Gifts bearing destinies” (26). Celan’s metaphor of poems as handshakes, as cited by Rankine in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, offers a vision of hands receiving one another in a gesture of welcome, which Rankine applies along with a rather idealized Levinasian vision of extension of (writing) subject to (reading) other. In contrast, the Culler’s/Keats’ “living hand” that extends from the writer instead haunts the reader with more chilling overtones, and the “dream hand” in “Gift” demonstrates the difficulty of connection through textuality. “Gift” signals an awareness that the text and the reception of text cannot be controlled; an absolute correspondence between what the writer intends to give/write and what the reader receives/reads is impossible, just as a pure gift is impossible. The “stirring inside / the trinket’s clutch” gestures to the possibility of something that may rupture the secure enclosure of the borders of the gift; in Derridean terms, the gift/text may overrun its borders and exceed its intentions. However, there is the possibility of a positive reading of Robinson’s text as gift. Though a textual encounter may fall short of an ideal Levinasian-Celanian “handshake” or welcomed gift to the attentive, the Levinasian-Celanian model may still be operative, with the caveat that surprise, varied expectations, and productive disruptions may arise.

I suggest that it is possible and productive to draw on Robinson’s poetry to put Levinas, Celan, and Derrida in conversation. While the focus of this dissertation is an analysis of postlanguage lyric poetry, the contrasts that I observe between Robinson’s writings and the Levinasian-Celanian model as it is advanced in *DLMBL* allows me to trace a theoretical trajectory from Levinas to Derrida. Robinson’s modification of the metaphor of the poem as

handshake in turn echoes Derrida's critique of Levinas. In many his writings, Derrida praises his friend's developments and attributes much of his ethics to Levinas. However, as Steven Shakespeare observes, in Derrida's essay "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," he also critiques Levinas's ethical philosophy as

too idealized, too cut-off from the actual experience of otherness as we encounter it. For Derrida, there is no ethics without that relationship of sameness-in-difference between me and my other. Only this relationship can be the basis for me to desire the other's well-being. The corollary of this is that the possibility of violence can never be wholly eliminated from the world. There is no absolute peace or absolutely nonviolent ethics. (92)

While Levinas posits a subjectivity that extends to the Other as infinite, Derrida insists that a subject can only experience otherness "in finitude and mortality (mine *and* its)" ("Violence and Metaphysics" 114-15). Therefore, rather than an absolute extension of the subject in submission to the Other's singular alterity, Derrida insists that "every reduction of other to a *real* moment of *my* life, its reduction to the state of empirical alter-ego, is an empirical possibility, or rather eventuality, which is called violence" ("Violence and Metaphysics" 128). In other words, the actual, appearance of the other as finite and mortal always involves the possibility of the subject reducing the other to his or her understanding. Thus the possibility of violence always remains, here, "violence" encompasses the conflict, oppression, and the bid for mastery that Levinas's ethics aim against. Derrida does not disagree with Levinas's goals, but insists upon the continued appearance of conflict and difference in encounters between subject and others. Consequently, Derrida argues for an "*economical*" ethics that recognizes that "to gain access to the egoity of the alter ego as if to its alterity itself is the most peaceful gesture possible" ("Violence and

Metaphysics” 128). I suggest that, Robinson’s writings illustrate the kind of a Derridean ethical encounter that modifies Levinas’s more idealized vision of ethical imperative. In “Nocturnal Bridge” and “Gift,” the subject’s encounter with the Other both gestures towards connection but nevertheless indicates the always-present possibility of conflict, difference, and bid for mastery.

“Speak”: Direct Address, Voice, and the Ethics of Lyric Encounter

Like “Gift,” the final poem of *Apostrophe*, “Speak,” takes up the ethics of encounter between the reader and writer through the medium of written text. Unlike “Gift,” however, “Speak” explores the encounter between reader and poet through the lyric poem by overtly examining the themes of direct address and voice in lyric poetry. Indeed, “voice” is a term that is repeated six times, appearing once in each stanza but one. In its meditation on the interrelation among reader, poet, and poetic text, Robinson, like Stewart, seeks to revise and complicate commonplace notions of lyric voice: “Address is its own metaphysics. See: the / hereafter in which I speak, now, solely / in your voice” (72). In the opening lines, “Speak” alludes to Culler’s reading of Keats’ “This Living Hand,” with its reference of the lyric “I” claiming to connect with the reader from the “hereafter,” which can refer to any future time, but particularly gestures to life after death. Unlike “Gift,” which is ambiguous in its use of apostrophe, “Speak” clearly takes up the topic of direct address to the reader. In “Speak,” address is both enacted—a lyric “I” repeatedly invokes a “you”—and, in the opening words of the poem, referenced directly: “Address is its own metaphysics.” If address is its own metaphysics, it is one that veers away from the Western metaphysics of logocentrism/phonocentrism that Derrida critiques. Robinson, like Derrida, rejects Western metaphysics that have been based on the privileging of the exact correspondence of the presence of the speaker/writer with the voice, and she shifts to an address that focuses on a voice that differs from the subject. The lyric “I” will “hereafter” speak “solely

in your voice,” that is, “in a voice I adopt from you.” Rather than a singular voice that can be found and secured, the poet’s voice intermingles within the reader’s and is necessarily plural. Furthermore, the line “I speak in your voice to say that what / I heard once is also what I said” also gestures to the plurality of previous voices/words that have preceded any writer.

What does the encounter between poet and reader and the text look like in “Speak”? While Keats’ “This Living Hand” gestures towards a haunted unity between writer and reader in the speaker’s insistence that the future reader must fulfill the poet’s command to give life to his hand, Robinson complicates any such vision of poetic union. The poet and reader may be “United, but how shall I ever know, speaking / in a voice that I would adopt from you.” Thus, in contrast to the persona of the giver/speaker in “Gift,” “Speak” acknowledges that the voice that emerges from the relation between the lyric “I” and the addressed “you” can never be fully known or circumscribed by the poet. For example, the reader and the writer are depicted as reading the same book, but they read from different directions. It is true that “there is / a middle”—the poetic text in which writer and reader encounter one another—but the text of “Speak” emphasizes poetry not only as a site that allows for encounter but also a site where the writer and reader may fail to unite: “Where is it that we do / not meet?” At the same time, Robinson resists the extremity of Barthes’ notion of the “death of the author,” for the lyric “I” has some agency, and shadings of the poet’s will and desire remain in the poetic text: “and where, I do not know, but that a thing I / desire could extend from me. Willful religion / that a voice could have its impact” (72).

While the poet’s desire and will to make an impact remain through the readings of various readers, the lyric “I” of “Speak,” unlike either the speaker of “Gift” or Keats’s lyric “I,” acknowledges that the outcomes of those desires—the shadings of later voices—are beyond her

complete knowledge and control. The phrase “where, I do not know” is similar to Stewart’s description of the voice as charting “the trajectory of writer and reader who can only project and approximate one another’s presence” (113). Indeed, while it attests to the possibility of transcendence through the writing and reading of lyric poetry, “Speak” contrasts markedly from “This Living Hand” in its poststructuralist self-awareness. Unlike Keats’ poem, it uses direct address self-consciously to project and approximate a reader’s presence while acknowledging that the reader will do likewise to the writer, and in this process create a new voice.

“Speak” also references the presence of a divine/spiritual element in the encounter of poet and reader through the text. Like Stewart’s reference to Diotima’s *daimon*, Robinson invokes neither the conventional muse of poetic creation nor the God of the Bible but a mediating “god” that delivers messages from the divine and enables the transmission and dynamic creation of poetic voices. Both the reader and poet are engaged in a kind of faith as they take up the text: “Here is a book in which both of us / believe in god.” This god is invested in the possibility of interrelation between reader and writer, the space *between* where encounter happens, imperfect as it may be: “So states the divine voice: that there / is a middle.” The conclusion of the poem continues to invoke the divine as the necessary intermediary. The line “I carried close my small transcendent, like / a balm” operates on a paradox: the lyric “I” may have longed for transcendence, which denotes expansion, but insofar as it was “carried close” and used for comfort, like a “balm,” it stayed “small.” This changes, however, with the words, “but I have your voice now.” On one level, then, “Speak” gestures to a Levinasian-Celanian model of the possibility of transcendence *across* time in the realm of the intersubjective, as one “speaks” and “lays oneself open.”

In the closing lines, Robinson plays with another paradox, an overtly spiritual one, as the transcendent is made possible through the immanent: “The mutual god is all immanent now, the center / that dispenses with pronouns.” The “mutual god,” the *diamon*-like spiritual figure, operates through the intermediating realm of immanence. Thus, the poetic text is configured as the in-between, the site of encounter between poet and reader that results in the dissolution of the pronouns of the lyric “I” and addressed “you,” for both the writer’s and reader’s identities are at least momentarily submerged in the spiritual practice of reading poetry. This idea of poetry as encounter accords with Waters also theorizes in his account of lyric address when he states that, in “reading lyric, there will be places where the participant roles of speaker, intended hearer, and bystander melt together or away; these are moments of wonder” (*Poetry’s Touch* 51). “Speak” concludes on a note where pronouns and therefore participant roles dissolve, and thus allows for a Levinasian-Celanian model of reading lyric poetry that allows for an awe-inspiring experience.

At the same time, I suggest that, while the concluding lines allow for the possibility of the wonder of lyric encounter, the transcendent moment should not be overstated. While “Speak” gestures to a Levinasian-Celanian possibility for encounter, the poem, like “Gift” and “Nocturnal Bridge,” tempers this model with a Derridean awareness that there is always the possibility that the speaking and reading “we” do “not meet.” The development of a new voice does not indicate a necessarily harmonious encounter between the poet and the reader. Instead, the lyric voice developed through the reading of poetry signifies a reader’s creative response that may or may not overlap with the writing subject’s original intentions. Thus, I argue, it is necessary to note that, just as Derrida’s ethics build on Levinas’s while insisting on the ever-present possibility of difference and conflict, Robinson’s model of lyric encounter largely allows for a Levinasian-Celanian textual encounter while modifying it through a Derridean emphasis on the potential

lack of connection between subject and Other. “Your voice” will never be in simple union with the voice of the lyric “I,” but the “gaps in the span” may lead to the development of a new, compound voice where new and creative possibilities can emerge.

In *Counterpart*, *On Ghosts*, and *Apostrophe*, Robinson retains but complicates the deployment of the lyric “I.” Aided by a poststructuralist understanding of language and epistemology, Robinson revisits opens up many concepts related to the lyric “I,” including self, presence, interiority, alterity, transcendence, mysticism, and voice. Robinson’s lyric and, at times, prosaic explorations involve the ethics of encounter between the writer and reader. To Robinson, the experience of lyric poetry always emerges within context of the relation among writer, reader, and poetic text. Her postlanguage lyric poetry demonstrates a poethics based on the subject’s responsibility to the Other, responsive reading, and the creative potential of difference within both self-encounter and lyric voice.

CONCLUSION

In this final section, I provide a brief overview of the central argument of this project, which considers ethics and subjectivity in the postlanguage lyric poetry of Claudia Rankine, Fanny Howe, and Elizabeth Robinson. I then raise further areas of investigation on the lyric and ethics. First, I raise the question, how could genre, specifically lyric essay, be considered in the context of the writings of these postlanguage poets? Second, I turn to the question of the body, and gesture to possible ways embodiment may be explored in further depth within these poetic texts. Finally, I suggest that recent writing, specifically Rankine's 2014 book *Citizen: An American Lyric*, present an ongoing exploration of lyric encounter that complicates some of the ethical premises discussed in this project.

In this dissertation, I argue that the postlanguage lyric poetry of Claudia Rankine, Fanny Howe, and Elizabeth Robinson demonstrates a fundamental investment in the ethical deployment of the first person subject. Their formal strategies for the subject's other-orientation differ. Rankine uses fragmentation, interruption, and juxtaposition to demonstrate the violability of the subject; Howe uses serial/spiral form to underscore subjectivity as wandering, in flux; and Robinson draws on tropes including the *doppelgänger* and the ghost to underscore the distortions of lyric reflections of the self and the otherness inherent in subjectivity. In this project, I use contemporary literary-ethical methodology, including the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, the *hauntology* of Jacques Derrida, and the *poethics* of Joan Retallack. Levinas, Derrida, and Retallack provide the terminology that describes how postlanguage poetry advances models of subjectivity that reformulate the conventional lyric "I." Rather than domineering, narcissistic, or purely inward, Rankine, Howe, and Robinson advance lyric subjectivities that demonstrate the self as circumspective, or constituted through its relations with otherness. At the

same time, the lyric “I” in these texts reference feelings, perceptions, and spirituality, thus retaining elements of interiority long associated with lyric poetry.

In addition to articulating ethical configurations of the lyric “I,” Rankine, Howe, and Robinson retain and revise the lyric by deploying what I term the Levinasian-Celanian model of postlanguage lyric poetry. According to the Levinasian-Celanian model, the poetic text is figured as a space for ethical encounter between writer and reader. Furthermore, lyric address is deployed or explored in these texts. The interpretation of postlanguage lyric text as a site of ethical encounter highlights the lyric poetry’s rhetorical or performative functions. In contrast with the conventional concept of lyric monologic or expressive, the concept of lyric as rhetoric foregrounds address to readers and the lyric text as inhabiting, in Retallack’s words, a “dynamic equilibrium between intention and receptivity, community and alterity” (3). In other words, the lyric text as a space of encounter is one in which writer and reader actively participate to discover and construct meaning. Furthermore, a key element of the postlanguage lyric is the postmodern awareness that contemporary poetry does not return to the model of communication wherein a writer as self-present subject directly conveys a message to a reader who is also a self-present subject. In particular, their texts aim to persuade the reader that the respective lyric “I” that emerges through their poetic texts is, in Blasing’s terms, credible and accountable. As an essential part of establishing their credibility after the interventions of Language writing’s critiques, these postlanguage lyric poets use the rhetoric of self-conscious reflexivity to persuade the reader of the poet’s awareness that the lyric “I” is a linguistic construct. Therefore, while the lyric text is theorized as a site of encounter, Rankine, Howe, and Robinson consistently signal the awareness that the “I” and the “you” are textual constructs that *gesture* to the writer and reader.

One issue that is ripe for further exploration concerns each of these poets' use of form and the question of genre. While I discussed several examples of form with each poets' writings, foregrounding their ethical implications, one aspect that I could explore further is their use of lyric essay. Lyric essay plays a key role in Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (and her more recent volume, *Citizen*), Howe's *The Wedding Dress*, and Robinson's *On Ghosts*. It would be helpful to situate these poets' use of lyric essay within the literary historical context of American prose poetry and delineate its significance for the hybrid form of postlanguage lyric poetry in particular. Again, critical reception of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* may provide a fruitful insight on contemporary texts that use prose poetry. In her reading of *My Life*, Lisa Samuels argues that Hejinian's use of prose poetry—that is, the “new sentence” of certain key texts of Language writing—is the ideal means to achieve “sincere complexity” (109). Samuels asserts that, as prose is our culture's medium for sincerity and clarity, and poetry is our culture's language for complexity and artifice, prose poetry such as the type in *My Life* “might afford the best opportunity for sincere surface play, for deep artifice, a joining of the power of prose clarity with poetic complexity” (109). I suggest that this concept of “sincere complexity” may be at play with the lyric essays of the postlanguage poets I analyze here as well. Furthermore, the prose in lyric essay in the texts by Rankine, Howe, and Robinson achieve a higher degree of surface clarity compared to the “new sentence” of Language writing, and this greater clarity may provide a productive way to approaches the classic conflict between avant-garde experimentalism and accessibility. Furthermore, I am interested in exploring lyric essay as *central* to the project of the postlanguage retention and revision of lyric conventions, for lyric essay is so often employed in these poetic texts as a means of discussing poetics.

Another area of possible further investigation concerns the body, which is a central issue for feminist poetry and criticism. On the one hand, much of my argument emphasizes how the “I” cannot “take on the corporeal,” in the words of Elizabeth Robinson that I cite in the epigraph to this dissertation. As Rankine explains in “The First Person in the Twenty-First Century,” the self as it appears in language can never attain the “solidity” of the physical body (134). On the other hand, the ethical concepts I deploy in this project depend upon bodily metaphors. I draw on the body in two main ways in this dissertation. Centrally, the Levinasian-Celanian model of poetry as encounter draws on Celan’s handshake as a bodily metaphor, which is then amplified by both Levinas’s concept of the face *and* his emphasis on touch (over vision) as the preferable means of encounter. Furthermore, in my reading of *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, I use Alison Landsberg’s theory of prosthetic memory to describe the process of how proxy memories can be inscribed within cultural consumers as a prosthetic device can be affixed to the body. This idea of prosthetic memory is particularly illuminating for Rankine’s writings, I suggest, because she is interested in the connections between body, affect, and media portrayals of publicized acts of violence and social injustice.

The question of the body can also be further explored in Howe and Robinson’s work. In particular, both poets share an interest in the incorporation of immanence within transcendence within a Christian theological understanding of embodied textuality. In her interpretation of Howe’s *O’Clock*, Clair Wills gestures to Howe’s connection between the bodily and the transcendent focuses on the connection between spirituality and the “specifically feminine sense of the rhythms of traditional practice and everyday life” (“Marking Time” 120). Wills therefore notes Howe’s interest in women’s spirituality as inextricably linked to their bodily experience of

domestic duties. Ripe for further exploration is the link between Howe's "incarnational aesthetics" and ethics of her poetry.

Robinson is similarly interested in incarnational aesthetics and the link between language and body. In an interview with Rosenthal, Robinson refers to her interest in "word as flesh as word" (Rosenthal 237). To Robinson, "the idea of the immanent and the transcendent are intimately, sensuously, inextricably braided together," a view that counters the Cartesian split between mind and body (Rosenthal 237). The presence of the body is a salient question for Robinson's embrace of a revised lyric poetry, with the question, as in Olson's projectivist verse, of the presence of the poet's breath as a transmission of the bodily to poetic form. While Language writers such as McCaffrey and critics such as Perloff roundly reject Olson's emphasis on breath, Robinson, in particular, seems interested to revisit this consideration. As Robinson explains in an interview, "Language comes from the body: We feel it in our mouths and we perceive it in our ears and we see it on the page. But it also conveys meaning and the way meaning gets lofted on time as we say the words on breath and air, and this can take a writer or a reader through experience that is not completely limited to the way the tongue hits the palate" (Rosenthal 237). In the epigraph to this project, I cite a poem from *Counterpart*, "Allege and Elegy," that notes the distance between the bodily self and the subject in language: "You want pronouns to take on the corporeal / but they are ... / frizzy, off their marks" (77). At the same time, the poem also insists "All is embedded in the lung," suggesting that while there may not be an absolute transmission of the bodily presence in the lyric, the breath, and therefore the body, is still an important dimension of Robinson's formulation of postlanguage lyric.

Finally, Rankine's most recent book, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), provides an ongoing exploration of postlanguage lyric encounter and ethics. This dissertation hinges upon

what I suggest is Rankine's a Levinasian-Celanian model of lyric as textual encounter in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. In the Levinasian-Celanian model, there is a mutual recognition that the subject and Other are "here," meeting, if not in the same ontological space, then at least the mediated space of the text. Since my writing of chapter 2, *Citizen* has been published and received with widespread notice and acclaim. *Citizen* shares with *DLMBL* a subtitle, a similarly flat narratorial tone, and the incorporation of visual images. Thus the two texts invite the possibility of being read as companion collections.

However, there are key differences between the two books. Centrally concerned with race relations, the text of *Citizen* interrogates very possibility of ethical encounter between black and white Americans. Specifically, the text of *Citizen* focuses on the inability and/or unwillingness of white Americans to acknowledge the presence and humanity of black Americans. *DLMBL* concluded with the importance of the subject's recognition of the Other as "here." In numerous episodes in *Citizen*, however, whites consistently refuse to recognize blacks as "here"; the text presents an overall critique of white unwillingness to acknowledge that they share the same ontological space with blacks. The text demonstrates the problem of encounter from the most quotidian "microaggressions" to the callous disregard for black lives, as evidenced by the death and violence engendered by police brutality, the catastrophic neglect of the victims of Hurricane Katrina, and the disparities of social justice for black victims of violence. *Citizen* does not present Levinas's concept of the face and Celan's handshake to demonstrate the possibility for encounter within either the text or personal experience. Instead, Rankine invokes what Judith Butler calls "addressability," which focuses on the vulnerability of the subject inherent in interactions with the Other. Thus, *Citizen* emphasizes how interaction between self and Other always has the potential for aggression rather than ethical action. In the context of my central

argument, I ask, what does *Citizen* imply for the Levinasian-Celanian model of encounter that concludes *DLMBL*?

Another key difference between the texts concerns pronoun usage. The recurrent meditation on the “I” in *DLMBL* shifts towards a pointed, and repeated, invocation of a shifting, racially ambiguous second person. Many sections in *Citizen* are aimed at a “you,” who is sometimes black, sometimes white, and sometimes (as also occurs in *DLMBL*) the impersonal “you” of American colloquial speech, a place holder for “one.” I suggest that this focus on the “you” highlights the rhetorical dimension of Rankine’s postlanguage lyric. Rather than emphasizing the text as ethical encounter, however, the text of *Citizen* demonstrates how fraught lyric encounter between writer and reader can be, given the complex realities of American race relations within the context of white privilege. For example, “you” is often pointedly raced, rather than assumed to be white; but the race of “you” also shifts, so that the reader must be alert to racially charged nuances of communication.

While one can contrast many features of *DLMBL* and *Citizen*, it would be incorrect to characterize differences between the two texts as a shift from the redemptive capacity of the interpersonal in *DLMBL* to the problems of political in *Citizen*. *Citizen* opens with an extended exploration of interpersonal encounters that devolve into microaggressions, and such episodes recur throughout the text with aggregating force to demonstrate how the black subject is relentlessly disparaged and viewed with suspicion. I suggest in the introduction to this dissertation that there is an implicit feminism in the argument that the interpersonal can complement and inform the political. While both *DLBML* and *Citizen* explore highly politicized events concerning violence and murder of black men, *Citizen* makes contemporary racism a central theme. Furthermore, *Citizen* includes the (often female) black subject experiencing

racially charged microaggressions on an interpersonal level. The cumulative effect of these episodes underscores the link between interpersonal and political, and how they inform one another.

Despite key differences, I think that it is nevertheless possible to treat *DLMBL* and *Citizen* as companion volumes. Butler's "addressability" cited in *Citizen* is another way of formulating the violability of the subject as "broken into" that I argue was present in *DLMBL*. What *Citizen* does is place the questions of violation within the context of contemporary race relations: blacks continue to be subject to more violations, and whites continue to commit racist aggressions and inhabit a relatively untroubled sphere of white privilege. *Citizen* does not deny the possibility of ethical encounter, but rather insists such encounters must be considered within the context of race, socioeconomics and the discourses of contemporary media. Rather than a representing departure from the Levinasian-Celanian model of postlanguage poetry, I suggest that *Citizen* productively complicates the strategies of the Celanian poetic "handshake" and Levinasian, ethical encounter.

WORKS CITED

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New York: Holt, 1957.
- , "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric." *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*. Eds. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom. New York: Oxford UP, 1965. 527-60.
- Altieri, Charles. "The Objectivist Tradition." *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*. 25-36.
- , "The Transformations of Objectivism: An Afterword." *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*. 301-17.
- , "What differences can contemporary poetry make in our moral thinking?" *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*. Eds. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, David Parker. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 113-133.
- Anderson, Erik. "A Prescription Against Despair: On Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*." *Pilot Light: A Journal of 21st Century Poetics and Criticism*. Pilot Light. March 2012. Web. 27 April 2015.
- Aristotle. *Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics*. Trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2011.
- Armantrout, Rae. "'Q' and the Serial Nomad." *A Folio for Fanny Howe*. 41-47.
- Ashton, Jennifer. "Poetry of the Twenty-First Century: The First Decade." *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945*. Ed. Jennifer Ashton. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. 216-230.
- Atterton, Peter, Matthew Calarco, eds. *Radicalizing Levinas*. Albany, NY: SUNY P, 2010.

Attridge, Derek. "Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other." *PMLA* 114.1 (1999): 20-31.

-----, *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Bar-Nadav, Hadara. "Who is Flying this Plane? The Prose Poem and the Life of the Line." A *Broken Thing: Poets on the Line*. Eds. Emily Rosko and Anton Vander Zee. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2011. 44-47.

Baudrillard, Jean. "Requiem for the Media." *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Trans. Charles Lein. St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981. 164-184.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

Burkitt, Ian. *Social Selves: Theories of Self and Society*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles: Sage, 2008.

Baer, Elizabeth Roberts. *Golum Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2012.

Baracchi, Claudia. "Ethics as First Philosophy: Aristotelian Reflections on Intelligence, Sensibility, and Transcendence." *Levinas and the Ancients*. Eds. Brian Schroeder and Silvia Benso. Bloomington, IN: U Indiana P, 2008. 103-126.

Barbiero, Daniel. "Reflections on Lyric Before, During, and After Language." *The World in Time and Space*. Ed. Edward Foster and Joseph Donahue. Jersey City, NJ: Talisman House, 2002. 355-66.

Baudelaire, Charles. *Flowers of Evil*. Trans. Keith Waldrop. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2006.

Bell, Kevin. "Unheard Writing in the Climate of Spectacular Noise: Claudia Rankine on TV." *The Global South* 3.1 (2009): 93-107.

Bernstein, Charles. "Stray Straws and Straw Men." *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984*.

- Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2001. 40-49.
- Blasing, Mutlu Konuk. *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007.
- Brito, Manuel. "Fanny Howe." *A Suite of Poetic Voices: Interviews with Contemporary American Poets*. Santa Brigida: Kadle Books, 1992. 95-104.
- Bruns, Gerald. "Should Poetry Be Ethical or Otherwise?" *SubStance* 38. 3 (2009): 72-91.
- Buell, Lawrence. "Introduction: In Pursuit of Ethics." *PMLA* 114.1 (1999): 1-19.
- Burkitt, Ian. *Social Selves: Theories of the Social Foundation of Personality*. London: Sage, 1991.
- Burt, Stephen. "Smokes." *Boston Review*. Boston Review, 1998. Web. 9 March 2015.
- Castle, Terry. *The Female Thermometer: 18th Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Celan, Paul. *Collected Prose*. Trans. Rosmarie Waldrop. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1986.
- Chanter, Tina. "Introduction." *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*. Ed. Tina Chanter. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2001. 1-27.
- Clark, Hilary. "The Mnemonics of Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*." *Biography* 14.4 (1991): 315-35. *Project Muse* Web. 23 Feb. 2015.
- The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Cross, F.L., and E.A. Linvingstone, eds. "Accidie." *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.
- Culler, Jonathan. "Apostrophe." *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981. 135-54.
- , "Lyric, History, and Genre." *New Literary History* 40.4 (2009): 879-899.

- Davidson, Michael. *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century*.
Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Davis, Colin. *Haunted Subjects: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis and the Return of the Dead*.
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone
Books, 1995.
- De Man, Paul. "Anthropomorphism and Trope in Lyric." *Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York:
Columbia UP, 1984. 239-262.
- Dembo, L.S. "The 'Objectivist' Poet: Four Interviews." *Contemporary Literature* 10 (1969):
155-219.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Micahel Naas.
Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999.
- , "The Double Session." *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: U of
Chicago P, 1981. 175-286.
- , *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: U of
Chicago P, 1991.
- , *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP,
1974.
- , "Hostipitality." Trans. Gil Anidjar. *Acts of Religion*. Ed. Gil Anidjar. New York:
Routledge, 2002. 356-420.
- , *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*.
Trans. Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.

- , "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas." *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978. 79-153.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, and Peter Quartermain. "Introduction." *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*. 1-22.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau, and Peter Quartermain, eds. *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1999.
- Dussel, Enrique. "'The Politics' by Levinas: Towards a 'Critical' Political Philosophy." *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*. 78-96.
- Dworkin, Craig. "The Fate of Echo." *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Eds. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2011. xxiii-liv.
- , "Penelope Reworking the Twill: Patchwork, Writing, and Lyn Hejinian's 'My Life.'" *Contemporary Literature* 36.1 (1995): 58-81.
- Earnshaw, Steven. *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum, 2006.
- Eskin, Michael. *Ethics and Dialogue: in the Works of Levinas, Bakhtin, Mandel'shtam, and Celan*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.
- Fan, Kit. "'Between the blank page and the poem': Reading Simone Weil in Contemporary American Poets." *The Cambridge Quarterly* 36.2 (2007): 129-154.
- "Fanny Howe." *Poetry Foundation*. Poetry Foundation, 2015. Web. 29 April 2015.
- Finkelstein, Norman M. "What Was Objectivism?" *American Poetry* 2.3 (1985): 51-63.
- Firestone, Reuven. *Title Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*. Albany: SUNY P, 1990. 65, 205.

- Fraser, Kathleen. "Partial Local Coherence: Some Notes on Language Writing." *Ironwood* 20 (1982): 122-42.
- Frye, Northrop. "Theory of Genres." *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. 30-39.
- Gelpi, Albert. "Emily Dickinson's Long Shadow: Susan Howe and Fanny Howe." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 17.2 (2008): 100-112.
- Genette, Gérard. "The Architext." Trans. Jane E. Lewin. *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. 17-30.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997.
- Gonzalez, Antonion Ballesteros. "Doppelgänger." *The Handbook of the Gothic*. Ed. Marie Mulvey-Roberts. 2nd ed. New York UP, 2009. 119.
- Gordon, Paul. *The Critical Double: Figurative Meaning in Aesthetic Discourse*. Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 1995.
- Green, Paul. "Woodsy: A Reclusive, Hidden or Fairy Self Within the Poetry of Fanny Howe." *A Folio for Fanny Howe*. 49-61.
- Green, Paul, ed. *A Folio for Fanny Howe*. Peterborough, U.K.: Spectacular Diseases, 2000.
- Greenberg, Arielle, Craig Santos Perez, Michael Theune, Megan Volpert, and Mark Wallace. "Hybrid Aesthetics and its Discontents." *The Monkey and the Wrench*. Eds. Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher. Akron, OH: U of Akron P, 2011. 117-147.
- Greer, Michael. "Ideology and Theory in Recent Experimental Writing: Or, the Naming of 'Language Poetry.'" *Boundary 2* 16.2-3 (1989): 335-55.
- Golding, Alan. "George Oppen's Serial Poems," *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*. 240-53.

Hatlen, Burton. "A Poetics of Marginality and Resistance: The Objectivist Poets in Context."

The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics. 37-55.

Hejinian, Lyn. *My Life*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1987.

-----, "The Rejection of Closure." *Writing/Talks*. Ed. Bob Perelman. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985.

Hinton, Laura. "Postmodern Romance and the Descriptive Fetish of Vision in Fanny Howe's *The Lives of a Spirit* and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*." *We Who Love to be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*. Eds. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue. Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2002. 140-151.

Hooker, Jeremy. "Seeing the World: The Poetry of George Oppen." *Not Comforts//But Vision: Essays on the Poetry of George Oppen*. Ed. John Freeman. Devon, Eng.: Interim, 1985. 26-41.

Hoover, Paul, ed. *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2013.

Horowitz, Asher and Gad Horowitz, eds. *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*. Toronto: U Toronto P, 2006.

Horowitz, Gad. "Aporia and Messiah in Derrida and Levinas." *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics*. 307-330.

Howe, Fanny. *Come and See*. Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2011.

-----, *Forged*. Sausalito, CA: Post-Apollo, 1999.

-----, *Introduction to the World*. Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 1986.

-----, *On the Ground*. Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2004.

- , *Selected Poems*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2000.
- , *The Wedding Dress: Meditations on Word and Life*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2003.
- , *The Winter Sun: Notes on a Vocation*. Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2009.
- Huk, Romana. "Alphabets of Unknowing: Fanny Howe's Signature of Anonymity." *A Folio for Fanny Howe*. 63-80.
- , "'A single liturgy': Fanny Howe's *The Wedding Dress*." *Christianity and Literature* 58.4 (2009) 657-693.
- Izenberg, Oren. *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011.
- Jackson, Virginia. *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*. Princeton UP: Princeton, 2005.
- Jackson, Virginia, and Yopie Prins, eds. *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2014.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Marx's Purloined Letter." *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's 'Spectres de Marx.'* Ed. Michael Sprinker. London: Verso, 1999.
- Jarraway, David R. "'My Life' through the Eighties: The Exemplary L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E of Lyn Hejinian." *Contemporary Literature* 33.2 (1992): 319-336.
- Jenkins, G. Matthew. *Poetic Obligation: Ethics in Experimental American Poetry after 1945*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2008.
- Jhally, Sut. *The Codes of Advertising: Fetishism and the Political Economy of Meaning in the Consumer Society*. London: Frances Pinter, 1987.
- Kane, Daniel. *What is Poetry? Conversations with the American Avant-Garde*. New York: Teachers & Writers Books, 2003.

Keats, John. *John Keats, the Complete Poems*. 3rd ed. Ed. John Barnard. New York: Penguin, 1988.

-----, *Letters of John Keats*. Ed. Frederick Page. London: Oxford UP, 1968.

Keller, Lynn. *Thinking Poetry: Readings in Contemporary Women's Exploratory Poetics*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2010.

Keniston, Ann and Jeffrey Gray. "Introduction: Saying What Happened in the 21st Century." *The New American Poetry of Engagement*. Eds. Ann Keniston and Jeffrey Gray. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 1-15.

Keltner, S.K. and Samuel J. Julian. "Existentialism." *Phenomenology: Responses and Developments: The History of Continental Philosophy*. Ed. Leonard Lawlor. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014. 43-66.

Kesteloot, Lilyan. "Cesaire—the Poet and the Politician." Trans. Ruthmarie H. Mitsch. *Research in African Literatures* 26.2 (1995): 169-173.

Kinnahan, Linda. *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2004.

Kimberly, Emma. "Politics and Poetics of Fear after 9/11: Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*." *Journal of American Studies*, suppl. *10 Years after 9/11* 45.4 (2011): 777-791.

Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004.

Lauterbach, Ann. "Three Introductions: Fanny Howe." *The Night Sky: Writings on the Poetics of Experience*. New York: Viking, 2005. 181-183.

- Lazer, Hank. "American Poetry and its Institutions." *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945*. Ed. Jennifer Ashton. Cambridge UP, 2013. 158-172.
- Lessard, Suzannah. *The Architect of Desire: Beauty and Danger in the Stanford White Family*. New York: The Dial Press, 1996.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1996.
- , *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philip Nemo*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985.
- , *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991.
- , *Outside the Subject*. Trans. Michael Smith. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1994.
- , *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969.
- , "The Transcendence of Words." *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Seán Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989. 144-49.
- Long, Christopher P. *The Ethics of Ontology: Rethinking an Aristotelian Legacy*. Albany: SUNY P, 2004.
- Lowy, Michael, and Robert Sayre. *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernity*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Durham: Duke UP, 2001.
- Martin, Dawn Lundy. "Saying 'I am' Experimentalism and Subjectivity in Contemporary Poetry by Claudia Rankine, M. Nourbese Philip, and Myung Mi Kim." Diss. University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2009.
- Mayama, Alain. *Emmanuel Levinas' Conceptual Affinities with Liberation Theology*. American

- University Studies VII: Theology and Religion, Vol. 292. New York: Peter Lang, 2010.
- McCaffrey, Steve. "Language Poetry." *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry since 1945*. Ed. Jennifer Ashton. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. 143-157.
- Meyrink, Gustav. *The Golem*. Ed. E.F. Bleiler. New York: Dover, 1976.
- Middleton, Peter. "'The Way of I AM': The Self in the Poetry of Fanny Howe." *A Folio for Fanny Howe*. 81-102.
- Mill, John Stuart. "What is Poetry?" *Essays on Poetry by John Stuart Mill*. Ed. F. Parvin Sharpless. Columbia, U of South Carolina P: 1976. 3-22.
- Miller, Mark Crispin. "Deride and Conquer." *Watching Television: A Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture*. Ed. Todd Gitlin. New York: Pantheon, 1986.
- "Mission Statement." *Church and Friary of Saint Francis of Assisi*. Church and Friary of Saint Francis of Assisi, 2014. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.
- Morrison, Rusty. "An Echoing after the Object." *Denver Quarterly* 39.3 (2005): 83-93.
- Mulford, Wendy. "Sister Poverty." *Talisman* 16 (1996): 151.
- Nealon, Christopher S. "Camp Messianism, or, the Hopes of Poetry in Late-Late Capitalism." *American Literature* 76.3 (2004): 579-602.
- , "The Matter of Capital, or Catastrophe and Textuality." *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*. 487-499.
- Ng, Andrew Hock Soon. "Introduction: Reading the Double." *The Poetics of Shadows: The Double in Literature and Philosophy*. Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2008. 1-13.
- Nicholls, Peter. "Of Being Ethical: Reflections on George Oppen." *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics*. 240-253.
- Oliver, Kelly. *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001.

Oppen, George. *Collected Poems*. New York: New Directions, 1975.

-----, "The Mind's Own Place." *George Oppen Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*. Ed.

Stephen Cope. Berkeley: U of California P, 2007. 29-37.

Palache, L. B. "Doggerel." *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton:

Princeton UP, 2012. *Credo Reference*. Web. 9 April 2014.

Parker, David. "Introduction: The Turn to Ethics in the 1990s." *Renegotiating Ethics in*

Literature, Philosophy, and Theory. Eds. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, David

Parker. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998. 1-17.

Perloff, Marjorie. *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound tradition*.

Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.

-----, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991.

Perpich, Diane. "Levinas, Feminism, and Identity Politics." *Radicalizing Levinas*. Eds. Peter

Atterton and Matthew Calarco. Albany, NY: SUNY P, 2010. 21-40.

Perloff, Marjorie. *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago: U of Chicago

P, 1991.

Poetry Society of America. "Q & A: American Poetry: Elizabeth Robinson." *Poetry Society of*

America. Poetry Society of America, 2010. Web. 24 March 2014.

Rankine, Claudia. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric*. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press,

2004.

-----, "The First Person in the Twenty-First Century." Eds. Sontag, Kate and David Graham.

After

Confession: Poetry as Autobiography. Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2001. 132-136.

Rankine, Claudia and Lisa Sewell, eds. *Eleven More American Women Poets in the 21st Century*:

- Poetics Across North America*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2012. 1-18.
- Rasula, Jed. "Ten Different Fruits on One Different Tree: Experiment as a Claim of the Book." *Chicago Review* 43.3 (1997): 28-39.
- Retallack, Joan. *Poethical Wager*. Ewing, NJ: U of California P, 2003.
- Richards, E. "Voice." *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012. *Credo Reference*. Web. 9 April 2014.
- Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead*, New York: Columbia UP, 1996.
- Robinson, Elizabeth. "An Aesthetic of Glimpses." *English Language Notes* 47.1 (2009): 183-185.
- , *Apostrophe*. Berkeley: Apogee P, 2006.
- , *Apprehend*. Berkeley: Apogee P, 2003.
- , *Counterpart*. Boise: Ashanta P, 2012.
- , "Music Becomes Story: Lyric and Narrative Patterning in the Work of Lorine Niedecker." *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2008. 113-130.
- , *On Ghosts*. New York: Solid Objects, 2013.
- , "Persona and the Mystical Poem." *The Monkey and the Wrench: Essays into Contemporary Poetics*. Eds. Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher. Akron: U of Akron P, 2011. 92-103.
- Rowland, Christopher. "Liberation Theology." *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*. Ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrance. Oxford UP, 2007. 634-652.
- Rosenthal, Sarah. "Elizabeth Robinson: Falling is the Safest Thing to Do." *A Community Writing Itself: Conversations with Vanguard Writers of the Bay Area*. Ed. Sarah Rosenthal.

- Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive P, 2010. 225-253.
- Samuels, Lisa. "Eight Justifications for Canonizing Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*." *Modern Language Studies* 27.2 (1997): 103-119.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.
- Scanlon, Mara. "Ethics and the Lyric: Form, Dialogue, Answerability." *College Literature* 34.1 (2007): 1-22.
- Sewell, Lisa. "Introduction." *American Poets in the Twenty-First Century: The New Poetics*. Eds. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2007. 1-15.
- Shakespeare, Steven. *Derrida and Theology*. London: T&T Clark, 2009.
- Shepherd, Andrew. *The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida, and a Theology of Hospitality*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014.
- Shepherd, Reginald. "Introduction." *Lyric Postmodernisms: An Anthology of Contemporary Innovative Poetics*. Ed. Reginald Shepherd. Denver: Counterpath Press, 2008. xi-xvii.
- Smith, Paul. *Discerning the Subject*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
- Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005.
- Spahr, Juliana. "Introduction." *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*. Eds. Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2002. 1-17.
- , "Resignifying Autobiography: Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*." *American Literature* 68.1 (1996): 139-59.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Translator's Preface." *Of Grammatology*. 1974. ix-lxxxvii.

- “Sponsorship.” *MCAS Miramar Air Show*. MCAS Miramar Air Show, 2014. Web. 19 Feb. 2014.
- Stewart, Susan. *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002.
- Swensen, Cole. “Introduction: Cole Swensen.” *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*. Eds. Cole Swensen and David St. John. New York: Norton, 2009. xvii-xxvi.
- , “Response to ‘Hybrid Aesthetics and its Discontents.’” *The Monkey and the Wrench*. Eds. Mary Biddinger and John Gallaher. Akron, OH: U of Akron P, 2011. 148-153.
- Sword, Helen. *Ghostwriting Modernism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2002.
- Vickery, Ann. “Finding Grace: Modernity and the Ineffable in the Poetry of Rae Armantrout and Fanny Howe.” *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 37 (1998): 143-163.
- Wallace, David Foster. “*E Unibus Pluram*: Television and U.S. Fiction.” *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 151-194.
- Wallace, Mark. “Toward a Free Multiplicity of Form.” *Telling it Slant: Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s*. Eds. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks. Tuscaloosa, AL: U of Alabama P, 2002. 191-203.
- Waters, W. “Apostrophe.” *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012. *Credo Reference*. Web. 9 April 2014.
- Waters, William. *Poetry’s Touch: On Lyric Address*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003.
- Wehrs, Donald R. *Levinas and Twentieth-Century Literature: Ethics and the Reconstitution of Subjectivity*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2013.
- Williams, C.G. “Glossolalia.” *Concise Encyclopedia of Language and Religion*. Eds. John F.A. Sawyer, J.M.Y. Simpson, R.E. Asher. Amsterdam: Pergamon, 2001. 249-50.
- , *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2010.

Willis, Elizabeth. "The Arena in the Garden: Some Thoughts on the Late Lyric." *Telling it Slant:*

Avant-Garde Poetics of the 1990s. Eds. Mark Wallace and Steven Marks. 225-235.

Wills, Clair. "Contemporary Women's Poetry: Experimentalism and the Expressive Voice."

Critical Quarterly 36.3 (1994): 34-52.

-----, "Marking Time: Fanny Howe's Poetics of Transcendence." *Contemporary*

Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice. Eds. Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones.

Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 2000. 119-139.

Winter, Caroline. "Me, Myself and I." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company. 3

August 2008. Web. 24 March 2015.

Woods, Tim. "The Ethical Diversity of US Twentieth Century Poetry." *The Cambridge*

Companion to Modern American Culture. Ed. Christopher Bigsby. Cambridge:

Cambridge UP, 2006. 450-468.

-----, *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary*

American Poetry. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

Wordsworth, William. *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*. Eds. James Butler and

Karen Green. Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1992.

Woods, Tim. "The Ethical Diversity of US Twentieth Century Poetry." *The Cambridge*

Companion to Modern American Culture. Ed. Christopher Bigsby. Cambridge:

Cambridge UP, 2006. 450-468.

-----, *The Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary*

American Poetry. New York: Palgrave, 2002.

Zukofksy, Louis. "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931." *Poetry* 37.5 (1931): 268-72.

-----, "Sincerity and Objectification, with Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff."

Poetry 37.5 (1931): 272-85.